

CAPE OF STORMS

By the same Author

POEMS

Against the Lightning
The Journey and the Dream
To the Unborn—Greetings

NOVEL

Beyond the Eagle's Rage

WAR

Sea Flight

PLAYS

Trouble in the Sun
The Siege of Mocking Hill



Ships and gulls

CAPE OF STORMS

Trawling off the coast of North Russia

HUGH POPHAM



RUPERT HART-DAVIS
SOHO SQUARE LONDON

1957

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY EBENEZER BAYLIS AND SON, LTD., THE
TRINITY PRESS, WORCESTER, AND LONDON

For Chris,
who couldn't come with us,
with love

Illustrations

*The photographs are from the film "All Square Aft!" and are reproduced
with the kind permission of Martin Films.
The Cameraman was Egil Woxholt.*

Ships and gulls	<i>frontispiece</i>
Looking for'ard, starboard side. Trawl and bobbins	<i>facing page 72</i>
Gutting	72
Empty cod-end and full pounds	80
One Marr's ships towing in scuffly weather	88
Ice on the whaleback	88
 Map drawn by K. C. Jordan	 <i>pages 8 & 9</i>
Diagram of hauling gear	66
Diagram of trawl	68

Contents

Prologue

p. 11

Part One

RUNNING OFF

p. 15

Part Two

THE FISHING

p. 67

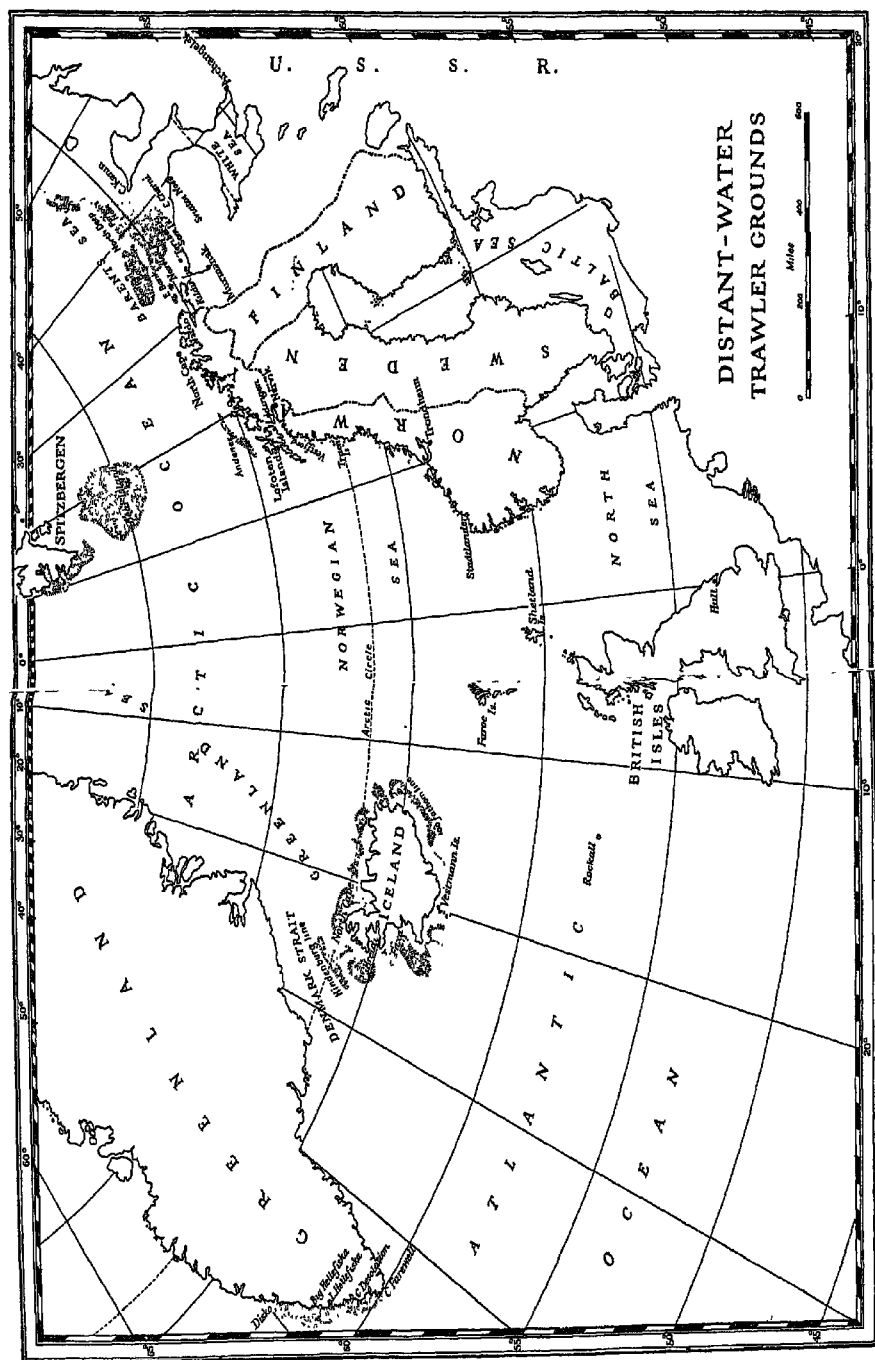
Part Three

HOMeward BOUND

p. 159

Glossary

p. 205



Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to J. Marr & Sons for their courtesy in allowing me to make the voyage to White Sea in their trawler *Brucella*; and, most of all, to my friend, Laurie Oliver, her Skipper, whose hospitality I enjoyed, and on whose memories of a lifetime at sea I have drawn so freely in the writing of this book. He has done all he can to make this as accurate an account of distant-water trawling as possible; but it remains its author's child. Any mistakes or faults in it are mine, not his.

H.P.

Prologue

IN the summer of 1955 I was doing some work with the Fishery Protection Service and found myself off the west coast of Iceland and in need of a lift back to England. This situation had been foreseen. Inquiries among various trawler-owners in Hull had all been met with much the same reply: "I'm sure any of our skippers will be glad to give you passage home, only don't expect them to stop fishing, and don't expect them to put into Reykjavik to pick you up." As Fishery Cruiser *Romola*, therefore, cruised north past the cliffs and fjords in search of fishermen in need of protection, her Captain, Commander Ridler, surveyed each ship we met through binoculars. He rejected a German, obviously on her way home: "Don't want to go to Hamburg, do you?"; and a tall-funnelled coal-burner with a Grimsby registration: "Too old!"

Then he passed me the glasses. "That looks a good one. Give him a call, Sparks." I followed his glance and picked out the rakish hull and squat funnel of a modern diesel ship.

Sparks gave him a call; and half-an-hour later, when he had hauled, I was on my way across the narrow intervening stretch of calm summer sea in *Romola's* whaler. The Doctor, on a courtesy visit, the Midshipman, in charge of the boat, and I scrambled over the side and up the iron ladder to the bridge, while the trawler's crew emptied baskets of freshly-caught cod and haddock into the bottom of the freshly-painted whaler.

The contrasts, as we opened the door from the veranda and stepped on to the bridge, were striking. There was, first of all, the contrast with the bridge of *Romola*, which I had just left.

PROLOGUE

Where that was bare, functional and, since it was open to the sky, as exposed as the South Col of Everest, this, with its roof overhead, its mats underfoot, and its dark panelling, seemed almost decadently cosy and well-appointed. Here was none of that gratuitous discomfort for which the smaller of H.M. ships are so justly renowned. The second contrast—and this was one I had noticed on visits to other trawlers—was between the appearance of the bridge and the appearance of the Skipper. The panelling, the radar set, the numerous radios, the even more numerous echometers, all suggested the trappings of efficiency: blue serge, gold braid, peaked caps. But the Skipper, who hopped out of his chair to greet us, was encumbered with none of these. A burly figure of forty-five or thereabouts, he was dressed in an ancient pair of corduroy trousers and a ganzy as full of holes as an old cod-end. On his feet were a pair of slippers, round his neck a red and white spotted choker, on his head a corduroy cap, and on his chin a week's growth of bristles.

We shook hands. "What do you naval blokes think we are then?" he asked. "The Royal Mail Line or something? Come and have a beer."

We followed him down into his berth, just below and abaft the bridge. Like the bridge itself, it was panelled in dark wood, and comfortable, with seat-lockers round two sides and a curtained bunk on a third, a fitted carpet, and an electric fire of the kind that emits a twinkling rosy glow. The light came from two scuttles, and from electric candles set in oak wall-brackets; and on the bulkhead was a trade calendar of a simpering young woman with a bunch of bronze chrysanthemums, and a horse's head set in a horseshoe.

The Skipper produced three bottles of beer out of a case in the corner, and we sat and talked fishing for a few minutes. The Doc delivered his medical supplies (aspirin, Elastoplast and a bottle of gin), and he and the Mid departed. Before the whaler was half-way back to *Romola* the Skipper had rung down for full ahead,

PROLOGUE

and I was watching in complete mystification the operation known as shooting (or, sometimes, as "shovelling the bloody gear overboard") for the first time.

At last I found an opportunity to ask the Skipper if he minded having a passenger foisted upon him in mid-ocean.

"I don't mind," he said, "if you don't mind being stuck aboard here for ten days or more. We've had a rotten trip so far; we've another thousand kit to catch before we can think about going home."

Since all passengers are considered to be potential Jonahs until the facts prove them otherwise, it was lucky for me that the fishing picked up; and when, a week later, we had set our bows for home and the Skipper said: "You ought to come with us to White Sea. You're a writer: you'd like the Fjords", I accepted the invitation for some months ahead with pleasure.

So it was that I first came across Skipper Laurie Oliver and *Brucella*; and so it was that I found myself, one misty October afternoon, back among the now-familiar sounds and smells of Hull Fish Dock looking for *Brucella's* trim buff upperworks and streamlined funnel-casing.

Part One

RUNNING OFF

High Water: 4.0 p.m.

HULL Fish Dock is like no other place on earth: a monstrous shed more than half-a-mile long open on the one side to the quay and on the other to the railway and the cobbled road, stacked high and wide with baskets and the ribbed, round aluminium bins known as kits, loud with the ringing of metal and the clatter of the dinghy-sized clogs worn by those who work there, whether bobbers, filleters, merchants or porters: pervaded by fish and the harsh, strong odour of fish; haunted by enormous gulls of rapacious habits and appearance; and so swilling in water, melting ice and slime that to walk through it normally shod is foolhardy.

By 2.0 p.m. on this particular October afternoon, however, the babel of the morning auctions was long over; the babel, and the extraordinary resonant din made by hundreds of pairs of clogs clumping along the rims of the kits; for, as if to make the process of auctioning the landings as arduous as possible, the merchants traipse after the auctioneer by teetering along the filled and closely-stacked kits. This makes every step a feat of balance, and, to the casual spectator, gives the wholesaling of fish a rollicking, sideshow air. It is as if stockbrokers bought and sold their shares while sliding down the banisters or tea-auctions were held on ice.

As the auctioneering is conducted in reverse—bidding down from a high price to a lower—and not a single word is audible, it may reasonably be described as occult as well.

Now, practically all the fish had gone, carried off by road and rail to Billingsgate or the fish-shops, and there was simply a hand-

ful of men swilling out the kits and stacking them; and, of course, the gulls with their hooked beaks and yellow eyes, lined up along the ridge of the galvanized iron roof or scavenging among the offal by the dockside.

Beyond, the narrow pool was choked with ships. The dock which had been built a century or more ago to harbour the small fishing-fleet that worked the North Sea was now the home port of two hundred big, seagoing vessels; ships of more than 500 tons burthen which bring from the distant-water grounds more than 265,000* tons of fish a year. I could see perhaps thirty or forty of them, double-banked along the quays; some landed on that morning's tide; some being stored and fuelled for the next trip; some, like *Brucella* herself, fishrooms full of ice, bunkers full of fuel, ships' books in order, crew ordered for 2.0 p.m., waiting for the tide.

The Skipper, smart in a grey suit and trilby, was standing at the dockside by the bows as I slithered across the slippery cement.

"Always check her draught for'ard before I go aboard," he said; and with that we scrambled over the bulwarks by the for'ard gallows and lowered ourselves on to the deck. All was bare, ship-shape, and dead. The fish-room hatches were battened down; the deck was clear except for the fixed stanchions that would frame the pounds; and I remembered the Skipper's boast when we were fishing in the summer and there were fish and guts and blood from the whaleback to the winch and from rail to rail. "You wait," he had said. "When the blokes have finished with her, she'll look just like a little yacht." And so, in the open sea, she had. Now she was idle, and stained by the shore; and the gulls perched in the shrouds and on the rails of the whaleback and along the bridge-top and dropped their wet, white pats of excrement with a nod of their tails. The bobbins, strung along the starboard rail like so much gigantic chain-shot, were red with rust, and the rubbishy dock-water sidled past.

* The figure for 1955 was 265,764 tons 17 cwt.

The old watchman came out of the galley as we climbed the iron ladder on to the casing and unlocked the wing-door of the bridge for us. The Skipper tipped him and he went mumbling off.

The Skipper sniffed the stale air, and went down through the chartroom and unlocked the door of his berth and slung his suitcase in the corner. "Ay," he said, "if you don't lock everything up, it'll go. They'll pinch your bit of soap out of the bathroom and the cloth off the table if you give them the chance." "They" were hostile and anonymous, a symbol of the land which is always inimical to ships, mercenary and fond like a woman one cannot forget.

We went back on to the bridge, and there were Charlie Holness, the Ship's Husband, and Fred Robinson, the Runner. Charlie, short, red-faced, an abrupt terrier of a man, is responsible to Skipper and Owners that the ship puts to sea at the appointed time with her gear in order, her requisitions met, her repairs done; and not merely this ship, but every ship in the company, a dozen or more. He meets them when they dock and is there when they sail, whether this is at three in the afternoon or three in the morning.

Robbie, the ship's runner, is responsible for seeing that the ship sails with a full crew. He sorts them out beforehand, with an eye to the Skipper's antipathies, orders them for two hours before high-water, and makes certain that they are there. He is an ex-bosun, tall, dark, smooth-haired with an ironic glint in his eye; and he and Charlie and the Skipper stand grouped by the radar set on the port side of the bridge and talk the shop of their common trade.

"What about that warp, then, Charlie?" the Skipper asks, glancing down at the two great barrels of wire on the winch. "They've not renewed it."

"It should be good for another trip."

"But it costs us three hours splicing it every time it strands. It lost us 300 kit of fish last trip, did that warp."

"Ay," said Charlie, shrugging. "I did hear what you made. Over six, wasn't it?"

"Six thousand, four hundred for twenty-two hundred kit."

"That's not too bad. Are you going after some flats this time, then?"

"The Boss wants me to. We'll have to see how it works out." He turns to Robbie. "So you've signed Third Hand on as Bosun?"

"Ay. There's not many good bosuns about just now."

"If I'd known that I might not have sacked old Ernie. But you must have someone lively down on the deck to keep the work going."

Spasmodic, professional, the conversation drifts on, veering from last trip to this, or to this time last year's. Each voyage is a continuation of all the previous voyages: the skipper carries them like a thread of beads, a rosary of experience which he will consult at need. Each voyage is a dream which the interruption of two nights and days is not strong enough to break. He will be glad when this moment is over, when the ship shakes herself free of the skirts of the shore, when, with the first rumble of the engines the slight, baseless anxiety of departure fades and confidence returns.

One by one or in groups of two or three, the crew come aboard, slinging their kitbags and suitcases over the bulwarks and vaulting on to the deck after them. In their blue suits and raincoats and shoregoing caps there is nothing to connect them with the sea: they are diminished by the landman's fifty shilling uniform. Only if you were to look at their hands might you guess their trade: fingers missing, abbreviated or deformed, are the fisherman's mark, and few get their bosun's ticket with hands unscathed.

The last two or three scramble over the rail: from a dropped canvas bag comes the unmistakable chime of bottles. Its owner grabs it up hurriedly, with a sidelong glance at the bridge, and reels off aft. Robbie says: "Well. That's the lot."

"Thanks. Not bad for an afternoon tide." It speaks well for the ship, and the crew, for the pubs and clubs are still open; and who wants to go to sca while he still has the price of a rum in his pocket?

"It's a good thing for uz they get skint; otherwise we'd never get some of 'em aboard."

"Have a dram before you go?"

"Not this time, Lauric, thanks all the same. Have a good trip."

"Thanks. I hope we will."

With a nod and a wave they are gone. The Skipper rings the engines to Stand By. One of the hands comes up and takes the wheel. The Skipper looks at the clock, then turns to watch the gates of the lock. "Won't be long now." The bridge windows are open; the Matc and two or three of the crew are on the whale-back.

"Cast off for'ard!"

The warp is dropped over the rail on to the quay among the loungers who have watched this so many times before. The ship stirs.

"Cast off aft!"

The telegraph jangles. "Slow Ahead!" Jangles again. "Slow Astern!" The deck under our feet vibrates and the black dock-water moves in slow swirls like oil. Gently the bow edges out from the wall, clear of the stern of the ship close ahead, edges out into the narrow gut of the dock where, already, other ships are jostling, ships we shall hear of again in the coming weeks, *Cape Warwick*, *Southella*, *Lord Howe*. As we drift into an untidy line, the lock-gates open and *Cordella*, flying light after landing her catch at Grimsby on a previous tide, comes in. The outgoing ships pile up, bow to stern. From *Cordella's* whaleback, high above us, an ex-shipmate yells down to us as we pass.

Then the way out through the lock-pit is clear and we slip through, past the swing-bridge and the waiting traffic, past the

offices and the Insurance Building, past the Boss who stands for a moment on the quay's edge watching us go, unmoving, unsmiling —out at last into the tea-coloured Humber flood and the mist that lies like mother-of-pearl over New Holland and the flat Lincolnshire coast.

TWO

Pains of Parting

WE are barely past Victoria Dock on our way down river to Spurn Head and the sea when I am summoned aft. I have been half-expecting this, the ordeal by liquor. Fortunately I am a good sailor.

There is nobody in the mess-deck, but from the berths below, down the vertical accommodation ladder, comes a tavern sound. They are arranged, these berths, on either side of a central gangway; big cabins, conforming to the flare of the hull, and each with six bunks in double tiers. In the after two a considerable party is in progress. Through a haze of smoke and tilted bottles of Lord Charles rum, an occasional familiar face materializes.

"'Ughie! 'Ow are you, old friend?"

Immediately a tot of neat rum is thrust into my hand, followed by a bottle of mild ale. Does one fire, in fact, burn out another's burning?

"Thought you was cooming with us last trip," says someone; and before I can reply, an enormous hand grabs mine and crushes it into a bird's nest of bones. "Ah 'aven't 'ad the pleasure afore, 'Ughie, but we've 'eard all about you." The owner of this gigantic nutcracker is about seven feet tall. Far up in the fog I identify a head of reddish hair, a long upper lip, a fatuous grin and two very small green eyes. This is Lofty, Third Hand.

"Biggest flaming liar as ever went fishing," says Jack Caine.

It is a longish sentence for Jack, who is small and old and angry, with a face like a pippin kept too long in the loft. He has a few, very definite ideas and no words at all with which to express them—or only one. Now he gives me a brief, choleric but quite *friendly glare*. “’Ow are you, ’Ughie, eh? All right?” And refills my glass.

Tich, the Cook, a little tight-skinned skull of a man, has already stowed his teeth away in a safe place for the duration of the voyage. He helps himself to two long gurgles straight from the bottle, smacks his gums, winks at me, and starts to pick a totally artificial quarrel with Lofty, who could roll him up into a ball with one hand and drop him into one of his own pots. They spar fitfully; then Tich grabs the bottle to make up for lost time.

“Ya little runt!” says Lofty.

The tide of people ebbs and flows between the two berths. Sparks, with his hair like a dishevelled halo round his grey face, says: “I hear you used to fly, old boy? Same here. We must swop yarns some time.” Perhaps my response to this invitation is insufficiently enthusiastic, for he vanishes. Later he reappears to ask me if I play chess. I don’t. He wanders off in disgust.

My wrecked right hand is shaken again. “You must be the pleasurer. Have a dram.” The brogue, coming from that dark, rather foxy face, might be alcohol, or Belfast, it is hard to say for certain. “I don’t know you, ’Ughie,” the voice continues, “but I’m glad you’re coming with us. Have a dram!” This is Alfie, Spare Hand.

The deep-sided bunks are choked with sea-boots, frocks, smocks, gloves, sou’-westers—all the expensive paraphernalia of the deep sea fisherman—and with kitbags from which further bottles of Lord Charles are dredged as occasion demands. Gradually, however, this session, which is being built upon the substantial foundation of a prolonged session in the clubs before we sailed, begins to have its effect. Some have gone already: those who remain are becoming noisier and less coherent.

"Gi' us 'On the Road'! Jim," roars Lofty; and Jim, the recently-promoted Bosun, wrinkles up his eyes and grins with decent coyness. Jim is fifty, or thereabouts, and has been a fisherman for thirty-five of his fifty years. He is a quiet, friendly, uncomplicated man with sons at sea and daughters married; slightly-built, wiry, and with his fair hair brushed forward into a cowlick.

"Come on, Jim!" says Lofty again; and Jim says: "Ay, all right," and goes out. When he reappears half a minute later to the opening bars of the song:

"I'm on the road, on the road, to anywhere,
With never a heartache,
With never a care"

he, too, has removed his teeth and put them in his pocket, has pulled an old coat round his shoulders and grabbed a broom for a stick, and, as he whistles for his dog, is transformed in the instant into an old tramp, bumming his way from pub to pub.

"Got no home, got no friends,
Thankful for everything the Good Lord sends . . ."

The climax comes when the tramp grabs up a dram, poured out for him and set on the cabin table, and downs it at a gulp; and the volume of sound, augmented by a Battersea dogs' home of yappings and barkings, nearly pops the rivets. Since the occasion when a stiff dose of the ship's standard panacea—a noxious compound known as "Flu Mixture"—was substituted for Lord Charles, this has involved a certain risk; but Jim never flinches. The bottles are whisked away to safety as his flailing arms sweep over the table, snatch the dram and raise it to his sunken lips.

"I'm on the road, on the road to anywhere,
And every milestone seems to say
That through all the wear and tear,
The road to anywhere
May lead somewhere in the end!"

Down it goes, rum or flu mixturc, and with a final roar the song ends. With a deep music-hall bow, Jim takes his applause and skips out.

"You ought to see 'im and 'is bruther together," says Lofty. "Oh ay, they're marvellous!"

The deck beneath our feet, shuddering with the engines at cruising revs, gives a slight tilt. We must be round Spurn Head and into the open sea. Another trip has begun. Already the pain of parting, the pain of resuming a life so monotonous, so uncomfortable, so out of balance, has been absorbed or drowned. That first lift of the bow to the sea's welter is like an acknowledgment that now there is no going back.

Tich reappears, grinning and capering. With his bald skull and toothless gums and glinting eyes he is as improbable as a troll.

"How's it going, Shorty?"

"All raight," says Tich with glee. "Ah've another bottle or two yet."

"We'll get no breakfast in the morning then," says Lofty.

Tich cackles. "Ay, you will!" In any case, the insult is utterly unjustified. Tich can cook after he can no longer stand. In fact, they say he cooks even better then.

"Any tea, Tich?"

"Yer don't want tea when yer've got this!" He knocks back another half-tumblerful. "Ay, there's a bread and booter and bully on the table. 'Elp yerselves."

The mention of food reminds me that I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. Liquor numbs the brain but excoriates the heart; and the swish of the waves alongside, the lights blinking and fading on the quarter, as I pause at the open door on my way to the mess-deck, fill me with an enormous, misty sadness. I grieve for the whole created world, and it is rather an agreeable sensation, omniscient and detached. I shall have a headache in the morning.

THREE

Plans

It is a thousand miles from the mouth of the Humber to Lødingen where we enter the northern fjords, the Leads. At twelve and a half knots, this will take us three and a half days, more or less, depending on the weather. From Lødingen to Honningsvaag, at the northern end of the fjords, is another twenty-four hours' steaming; and from Honningsvaag, where we drop our pilots, to the fishing-grounds of the Barents Sea—which fishermen (and their charts) call the White Sea—will take us another twelve to thirty-six hours, depending where we make for. It will be five days, anyway, before we start fishing.

By breakfast on the first day out, the routine of "running off" is established. The Mate and the Bosun each have a bridge watch, with two men taking hourly spells at the wheel. Their powers of recuperation are remarkable. Even Jim, with his teeth safely housed again, has quite recovered from the rigours of the road, from the liberation of that inner Jim who is no bosun but a music-hall artist *manqué*. Already he and all the others are committed to the seaman's chief preoccupations—making tea and staring at empty sea and sky. It is fine, calm and slightly misty, and the ship thrusts with hardly a tremor through the flat, grey-green sea.

On deck in the mild sunlight the component parts of a new trawl are being laced together with crisp, hairy yellow sisal wound on to netting-needles. When that is done, and the trawl—a stocking with a square mouth more than 100 feet across and tapering away over the same distance to the toe, the cod-end—is made up, it only remains to lash top and bottom to their respective wires: the fishing-line with its row of bobbins, the head-line with its row of floats, and it will be ready for shooting. There are

three more trawls already made up in the net-store below the whaleback, in case of accidents.

Another ship of our company passes us during the morning, homeward bound. "It's either *Thornella* or *Northella*," says the Skipper while I am still trying to make up my mind if it is a trawler or a coaster. "If it's *Thornella*, it's her maiden trip. Ay, she's a brand-new ship. Her skipper, Charlie O'Neill, was bosun with me just after the war. If it's *Northella*, her skipper's a bloke called Hinchcliffe. He was a decky-learner with me before the war!"

The Skipper, who got his Master's ticket when he was twenty-two, has been taking trawlers out of Hull for close on quarter of a century, so it is hardly surprising that he can identify almost any trawler as soon as she is hull-up. She may be a Grimmy, or a Fleetwood ship, a German from Bremerhaven or one of the modern, spoon-bowed Russians; but if she is a Yorkie, the chances are that he—and anyone else who happens to be on the bridge—will know her name, the company she belongs to, her previous names (if any), her skipper (and the salient points of his character and career), her mate, how much fish she landed last trip and how much money it made. In addition they will know whether she is diesel-driven or a coal-burner, or a coal-burner converted to oil, and whether or not she is a good sea-ship. Somebody will almost certainly have sailed in her.

And that is an odd thing. Skippers and crew alike move from ship to ship and from company to company; they make their judgments on them all, preferring this ship to that, avoiding one company because it is notoriously mean with its provisioning, another because its ships are ill-found; but they give abiding loyalty to none. In this they differ from other sailors, who tend to be sentimental about the ships they sail in if not about the companies they work for. At the same time, the fisherman's identity with his trade is close, and the Hull distant-water trawling industry is as exclusive as a club, as gossipy as a sewing-circle.

Reputations are jealously established, and as jealously demolished. The successful skipper is accused of conceit; the unsuccessful gets scant sympathy from his fellows, and none at all from his owners. The successful skipper makes money and gets each new ship as she comes along; the unsuccessful—whether his failure is of luck or skill is of no consequence—goes from firm to firm, taking ships that are old and inefficient—when he can get even them—and spending long, profitless spells ashore in between. Too proud to ship as mate, he ends up in some trivial post around the fish-dock or in a night watchman's hut. Over the brazier's fumes, he talks authoritatively of fishing, letting it be known that he too was a skipper once, and of the evil times when men such as himself cannot get a ship.

Whichever way it goes, a skipper's career is minutely watched; and, as a result, the manifestations of success—new cars, a house in the right district, a daughter's wedding—are important to him: all the more so, perhaps, as he is hardly ever at home to enjoy them.

Although he may not admit it, every skipper knows, moreover, that success is precarious. There are many more skippers than ships: the bosses are in the trawling business to make money: a skipper who does not make money is out. The logic is indisputable and harsh. It gives to the skilled, chancy and arduous task of catching fish its particular nervous tension.

"Here we are," Laurie says from the chartroom, and I go down the three steps from the bridge and join him at the chart-table. The chartroom, on the starboard side, is also a lobby, leading through on the same level to the Skipper's Cabin, and, down a ladder to the deck below, to a companionway which leads for'ard to the winch-generator and a pantry, and aft to Sparks's berth, the tiny saloon where the "officers" eat, and, through a sound-proof door, into the engine-room and so aft to the accommodation.

The small-scale chart of the Norwegian and North Russian

coasts is spread out on the chart-table. "You see the Lofotens, here; and Traen Islands. That's the mouth of Vestfjord. And there's Lødingen, where we pick up the pilots. We go right up, past Tromsø, past Hammerfest, keeping inside all the time, until we come out to the east'ard of North Cape, here, at Honningsvaag. What do we do then? That's the problem. If we do what the Boss wants, we've the best part of another thirty-six hours' steaming. Once we're round Nord Kyn"—his finger marked the track round the head of Norway—"we go south-easterly, past Vardo, Navolok, Kildin Island, past Teriberski, past the Sem Islands and Cape Cherni to Sweatynos—it's not spelt like that on the chart, but that's what we call it—until we're about here." The finger came to a stop halfway between Sviatoi Noss and Cape Kanin, directly off the entrance to the White Sea. "And somewhere about here—ah, that's the spot, d'ye see, in forty fathoms—we should catch some plaice. And three or four hundred kit of plaice would just do us nicely. But . . ." He chuckled. "There's always a 'but', isn't there? Supposing there aren't any plaice when we get there? We've wasted twenty-four hours' steaming getting there, and we shall have to waste at least another twelve hours steaming back again whatever we do, whether we go for Teriberski or Kildin or North Deeps. That's thirty-six hours' fishing wasted. So, you see, it's not as straightforward as it looks."

He was silent, puzzling over the chart, and I let the names, as strange as Chimborazo and Popocatpetl, make their music in my head: Navolok, Cherni, Teriberski, Kanin, the Sem Islands, Novaya Zemlya: frontier names along the limits of the north. And I remembered the last time I had been off that Murmansk Coast, with the ships at the stern of the convoy turning in that terrible slow half-circle like a dying animal and the lease-lend Airacobras flirting uselessly overhead. What a waste of blood and honour it had all been.

"I expect we'll see the Russian Fleet," Laurie said. "They exercise off Kildin. We found ourselves surrounded by the

bastards a trip or two back." He slipped the chart back into the drawer. "There's one or two ships out easterly now, looking for flats. If we can find out how they've been doing . . . a lot depends on the weather." He laughed a little ruefully. "I know one thing. If we don't come back with some flats the Boss'll want to know the reason why!"

FOUR

"Noroway o'er the Faem"

GRADUALLY the weather deteriorated. We had left Hull on Tuesday afternoon. By 7 o'clock on Thursday morning, when I went on to the bridge, the calm sea and the blue sky had vanished. Instead a grey overcast bore down upon a sea white-flecked by a freshening SW wind. There was one break in the cloud to the eastward, one ragged crimson gap low down over the running waves and framed in it a scribbled line of mountains, the Norwegian coast.

"To Noroway, to Noroway,
To Noroway o'er the faem.
The king's daughter o' Noroway,
'Tis thou must bring her hame."

It was an appropriate first glimpse of a legendary shore.

With wind and sea astern the ship was surging like a surfer. The weather forecast gave a SW gale warning for Stadtland Head, the area we were in, and all day as we steamed NE, wind and sea increased. Yet the ship continued to ride high and dry. This seemed to impress the Skipper and the crew as much as it did me. Trawlers have always had low rails and little freeboard for easy handling of the gear, and this makes them very wet. *Bricella* has, among several other innovations, rather higher rails, the

“NOROWAY O’ER THE FAEM”

deck being raised along the starboard side by means of a staging. Since she is a diesel ship as well, she carries a mere seventy or eighty tons of fuel, as against two hundred tons or more if she were an oil-burner, and so she is as buoyant as a bottle.

“If you were in almost any other ship,” says the Skipper, “she wouldn’t be riding like this, you know. She’d be level with the water. You couldn’t get on deck.”

All *Brucella* does is dip her lee scuppers in a lady-like way from time to time.

As night falls the wind hauls round to the westward and the rain begins. With the sea on her beam, she starts rolling with a quick, light pendulum motion. The effect from the bridge windows is vivid. In the glow of the masthead lights the white-painted guardrails and breakwater on the whaleback rise and veer and tilt, and the bow-wave spreads out on a level with one’s eyes in a wide splash of foam. In the gloom beyond, the wave-crests go riding off, grey smudges against the whipping dark; and every now and then, as the bow dips and we go sliding down the long slope of a wave, the propeller races and the ship shudders throughout her length. “To Norway, to Norway, to Norway o’er the faem. . . .”

In the steam-heated warmth of the bridge, with the wind setting up its stormy tune in the rigging and those chilly lines running through my mind—more in the context of that wild glimpse of cape and cliff than of poor Sir Patrick Spens and his doomed voyage—the thousand years that separate us, ploughing northwards to the fjords, from the Norsemen, rowing out for slaves and plunder, the barrier of time and unfamiliarity, breaks down. This is the coast of the Sagas; and it is not difficult to imagine the Vikings—the men of the creeks, those bold, treacherous and pitiless pirates—setting out in the long ships, on the stem a dragon’s head and on the stern a dragon’s tail and gilt on the sides of the bows and thirty-five rowers’ benches under the great loose-footed square sail, setting out to fall like the flail of God on the Orkneys

or Iceland, Germany or North Russia, Sicily or Constantinople. They were men of fire and blood, sailors and warriors to the bone, these Haralds and Haakes, Halfdans and Olafs, jarls and scalds, and whoever has a taste for these things, the Heimskringla will sate him. They knew how to kill and how to die. Here is the death of Halfdan Haaleg: "Thereafter Earl Einar went up to Halfdan, and cut a spread eagle upon his back, by striking his sword through his back into his belly, dividing his ribs from the backbone down to his loins, and tearing out his lungs . . ."* And here is the death of King Hake: "King Hake had been so grievously wounded that he saw his days could not be long; so he ordered a warship which he had to be loaded with his dead men and their weapons, and to be taken out to the sea; the tiller to be shipped, and the sails hoisted. Then he set fire to some tar-wood, and ordered a pile to be made over it in the ship. Hake was almost if not quite dead, when he was laid upon this pile of his. The wind was blowing off the land—the ship flew, burning in clear flame, out between the islets, and into the ocean. Great was the fame of this deed," adds the chronicler, "in after times."

Feud and vendetta, murder and arson, rape and pillage: a list of their activities is a veritable catalogue of crime; but the drive, the impulse, the itch that compelled them to set forth, north, south and west, in their open vessels is only glimpsed in the Sagas. "In the discontent when King Harald (860-933) seized on the lands of Norway, the out-countries of Iceland and the Faeroe Isles were discovered and peopled." Or: "And thereupon new quarrels arose among the brothers; and because they thought their dominions too little, they drove about in piratical expeditions." To every pressure there is a response; and to the pressure of hunger or discipline or divided loyalty the Vikings' response was a raiding expedition. To curiosity or a desire for knowledge they seem to have been immune: the forces that drove them were savage and fundamental.

* *The Norse King Sagas*: Snorre Sturlason. Everyman edition.

“NORWAY O’ER THE FAEM”

“What is a woman that you forsake her,
And the hearth-fire and the home-acre,
To go with the old grey Widow-maker . . . ?

Yet when the signs of summer thicken,
And the ice breaks, and the birch-buds quicken,
Yearly you turn from our side, and sicken——

Sicken again for the shouts and the slaughters,
You steal away to the lapping waters,
And look at your ship in her winter quarters. . . .*

“Nobody’d come if it weren’t for the money,” says Leslie at the wheel, stroking his heavy chin, and my thoughts come straying back from the invisible coastline away to starboard to the shadows round me in the dim bridge-lighting—Lofty, Les, Johnny Large. “Why, when there’s soft jobs ashore and blokes picking up twelve and fifteen quid a week! If you ask me, anybody who comes fishing’s barmy. Must be!”

But they come, all the same. Pressure—response? A historian’s generalization. “Ah’ll tell you why Ah coom,” says Ted, appearing at this moment with a pot of tea for the watch. Ted is a heavily-built young man with more of the look of a countryman than a seaman about him; and his dislike of trawling, one gathers, is intensified at the moment by the twin acerbities of acute toothache and imminent parenthood. The tooth was wrecked by some mechanic, masquerading as a dentist, the morning we left; the baby is due today, or tomorrow, or next week: the mathematics of gestation are an inexact science.

“Ah cum,” he says aggrievedly, banging the pots down in the rack by the wheel, “because there’s nowt else ah can do. Ah was sent to sea because me father and me uncle and me grandfather all went to sea. Ah went to nautical school for three year and ah’ve been at sea six year and ah failed my bosun’s ticket because of me eyesight, and now ah’m trapped.”

* *Harp-song of the Dane Women* by Rudyard Kipling.

CAPE OF STORMS

The pressure of environment, of a family tradition, is still strong on fishermen; and Laurie himself could start his reminiscences in almost exactly the same words as his father started his: "My first recollections of Hull Fish Dock are when, as a small three-year-old boy, I was taken to meet my father returning from sea."*

It was, in fact—it is less so now—quite difficult for a lad born into a fishing family *not* to become a fisherman. They were keen, too. Many of them are still. The world is not wide enough when you are young, and the smell of the sea is a fever in the blood. When the fever abates, of course, it is too late; not in many does it burn for a lifetime. Nowadays the tradition that a son should follow his father into the fishing fleet is beginning to crumble: Brough aerodrome, employing six or seven thousand in its aircraft workshops and paying good money, has suddenly become a Mecca, not for the faithful but for the disillusioned. Trawlers sail short-handed, especially in winter.

But to a good number, to Johnny, I expect, who smiles his round, contented smile and says nothing, to Les, whose brother has broken out of the establishment and now runs a prosperous shop or two in New Zealand, it is a job not greatly different to any other job. Anybody who comes fishing's barmy, of course; but there's something to be said for barminess.

George, the Mate, comes up yawning to take over the watch. His attitude to fishing is as gritty as Ted's but a bit more positive. He is a freak in this company, anyway, being an Australian. He is tall and rangy in the Australian way, with black hair and a wolfish look in the cast of his features and in his very pale blue eyes. He was born and brought up on a farm outside Melbourne, and escaped being sucked into the civil service by joining the RAAF at the start of the war. As a navigator he spent most of his time either ferrying American aircraft across the Atlantic or bogging

* In *World Fishing*, October 1953. "Reminiscences of a Trawlerman", by William Oliver.

up and down Western Approaches with Coastal Command. With the end of the war he went home to be demobbed, and then returned to England intending to join BOAC. But the doctors found he had a perforated ear-drum, and he failed his flying medical.

At a loose end, he came to hear that there was money to be made, and quickly, in trawling; made tracks for Hull, and shipped as a deckie-learner. Now, eight years later, he has his skipper's ticket; has, indeed, taken his own ship to sea for a number of trips. A mixture of bad luck and inexperience—and, possibly, a little regional jealousy, a predisposition, let us say, to distrust an interloper—worked against him, and he found himself temporarily back as mate.

"I gave myself ten years," he says in that scratchy Australian voice. "I've got two more to go. After that they can stuff it."

"What will you do?"

"Buy a farm. That's what I've always wanted to do, and that's what I'm going to do. When I've made enough money at this lark I'll start on me own somewhere. Christ, why else would a man do a bloody awful job like this! Catching bloody cod! Have a heart!"

It sounds convincing; yet there's a touch of pride in most of them somewhere. Perhaps sanitary inspectors are proud of being sanitary inspectors; if so, they are more likely to admit it than a trawlerman in so many words. The admission as far as they are concerned is strictly tacit, is expressed in their characters, by the sort of people they are; or else inverted into a confession of barminess.

"You've got it all wrong," George adds, "if you think there's any glamour about this job," and we stand, tilting with the tilt of the deck and looking out at the black and blowing night. Glamour? No. Glamour's a fake, the glitter on other people's jobs from a safe distance, the jobs of people tougher or more tenacious or better-looking—different, at all events. But these days, when it's soft for the body and hard for the soul, and

danger's like an infection in the air instead of a sword in the guts, there is a kind of nostalgia for discomfort among those whose criterion of discomfort is a crowded suburban train or a cold cup of office tea. Somebody's got to suffer for us, the hard, physical suffering of frozen fingers and the toppling wave.

It is a fruitless argument to pursue among unloquacious men like these; and at this moment it is interrupted by the Skipper coming up on to the bridge.

"Hey, Sparks, what about this weather report? I thought the wind was supposed to be moderating?"

Sparks, who has been totally immersed in last Sunday's *News of the World* in a crackle of static, pops up out of the wireless room.

"Here we are, Skipper. Halten Bank: WNW. Fresh to strong breeze. Traen Islands, the same."

"This is a lot more than a strong breeze," says the Skipper, peering out to port. "All the same, I'd rather have this wind than the other. I don't like a following wind."

There is a certain mental discomfort about having a voracious sea swaggering up astern, ready to pounce if the ship should wallow and fall broadside on; but there is a certain physical discomfort about the beam sea we have. It is as well, for instance, to decide on the next handhold before casting off from one's present one; and all the books and magazines on the seat-locker in the Skipper's berth, and anything else movable, including the one solid but unanchored chair, have started to travel from one side of the cabin to the other. More aggravating, since all these can be tracked down and wedged, is a loose bolt that some benighted shipwright has left sculling about in the ceiling of the bathroom next door. At irregular intervals, but with each heavy roll, this item starts to trickle across the ship until it ends up helter-skelter against the far bulkhead, pauses, and starts to trickle back. Without taking the ship to bits, there seems to be no way of stopping it.

The Skipper never uses his bunk. It is rather high, being set above two banks of drawers, and it faces fore and aft. This is

uncomfortable when she's rolling; besides, he would feel shut away, trapped behind its high bunk-boards. So he sleeps on the seat-locker, from which, if he is called out, he has only to roll out and into his slippers to be on the bridge; and I have the bunk.

"It's going to be a restless night by the look of things," he says as we turn in. "Never mind. This time tomorrow morning we shall start getting a lee from Skomver. We're making good time."

I wedge myself diagonally across the bunk, but it is a long time before I fall asleep. There are the random, slithery noises, and that sharp, breathtaking pause before an especially big roll; and there is a curious vertebral wriggle she gives from time to time, as if her keel were articulated somewhere amidships. There is the pulse-beat of the diesels—the exhaust goes up inside the funnel casing a foot or two from my head and leaves some of its fumes behind—and the shudder as the propeller races; and the occasional jolt as the bow, left hanging over a trough, comes thudding down on to the next sea. A ship is alive all right, with her own methods of handling the volatile element she rides. Aft, where one gets the full benefit of any pitching and the vibration from the engines makes one's teeth chatter, one is conscious of being in a steel-hulled motor-ship power-driven through the water; up here the motion is more like the swoop and flutter of a sailing-boat.

After a time one drops into a fitful doze, to be brought up sharp by a heavy lurch or tickled into semi-wakefulness by the rogue bolt skittering from port to starboard and back again and always just out of phase with the rolling of the ship.

FIVE

Loom of Lights

FOR twenty-four hours the Norwegian coast has been sliding past beyond our eastern horizon. Today, Friday, broke fairly

clear, with a fine brawling swell rolling in from the NW, and showers stalking along the round rim of the world; and at 11.30 the rain ahead blew over to reveal one huge, grey, decrepit molar, and next to it, a single spike, like an eye-tooth. These were the Traen Islands, the gateway to Vestfjord and on the latitude, near enough, of the Arctic Circle. Like all geographical expressions and imaginary lines that ring so splendidly, like the Tropic of Capricorn or the Equator itself, it lets us down: no orcs or icebergs or sea-serpents bar our progress; only the rotting teeth of the Traen Islands bridling in the mouth of the sea.

Nevertheless, we are within the Arctic Circle; we have averaged over twelve-and-a-half knots over the past twenty-four hours; and soon to the eastward, beyond the islands, the steep and spiky coastline of the mainland springs out of the blur of rain like a paling fence, a fence whose points are painted white with snow. We are into the gullet of Vestfjord now. Outside it may blow great guns if it pleases: we have thirty-six hours of sheltered water before us.

At 6.0 p.m. the loom of Skomver Light—a double flash every twenty seconds—comes fanning up over the western horizon beneath a basalt-black procession of cloud-silhouettes, a family of dinosaurs on the move through the green glow of a doomed world. Lofty reports the punctual appearance of Skomver to the Skipper, who comes up on to the bridge to see for himself.

"Ay; that's Skomver all right." He switches on the radar, and the vacuum-cleaner hum starts up in the wireless room. After a minute or two the scanner starts to turn and draws on the tube a magical, luminous-green map of the invisible land: the long tongue of the Lofotens vanishing off the screen to the northward, and, to starboard, the higher cliffs and mountains of the mainland. Between their converging images, the spot of light that is the centre of the scanner, the ship herself, moves in a flurry of light-splinters echoing from the surrounding waves. It is hard not to think of it as an airman's eye looking down from twenty thousand

feet upon the bays and ships and headlands, and to visualize it instead as being produced by an electronic echo emanating from the scanner no higher than the bridge-top just over our heads. To the ignorant there are still wonders, even if nowadays they rest upon incomprehension instead of incredulity. We are credulous enough: that is what, eventually, makes the miracles of science so dull. A bomb will never be in the same class as a thunderbolt. This seems to be rather a good argument for putting all scientists out to grass and reinstating the gods once more; but before there is a chance of pursuing it, the Skipper abandons his consultation of his latter-day Hermes, his Decca oracle, and switches it off. The howl from the wireless room whirrs into silence.

"We should pick up Tennholmen next," he says. "Fine on the starboard bow. We shall know exactly where we are then; all we've got to do is follow the lights in, Maaloy, Flatoy, and last of all Baroy, in the approaches to Lødingen. It must be one of the best-lighted coasts in the world, this. Ay, and it needs to be."

Our pilots are already ordered for 2.0 a.m. The Skipper turns to Lofty. "Give me a call when you pick up Tennholmen, will you?"

"Ay, right-oh, Skipper."

The Skipper goes down into his cabin. Lofty winks at me in the gloom. "All right, 'Ughie?'"

Now, when we're running off, and during the last week of the trip, when we cover the same course homeward, is the time for yarning. When we are fishing, everyone is too busy, or too tired. Now those off watch, if they haven't got their heads down, are sitting round the long table in the mess-deck aft; and those on watch have as their preoccupations the unexacting tasks of steering the ship or keeping a look-out, and neither of these activities precludes conversation.

Whether Lofty is, as Jack Caine asserts, the biggest liar as ever

went to sea or not, he has a way of making the most inherently probable story immediately suspect. There is in his big foolish face such an open, innocent villainy. Life is a colossal joke which, by the exercise of a little charm, a little cunning, can so easily be turned to one's own advantage. On his own admission—quite apart from the hints and taunts thrown out by the others—he is quite unscrupulous; he is to be neither believed nor trusted; he is a scamp. But for so long as he is neither trying to borrow one's money nor pinch one's girl-friend—unlikely eventualities on this trip—these are purely theoretical disadvantages. On the bridge during the long watches they are not, indeed, disadvantages at all: they are a positive asset. Bizarre experiences and a picaresque style are usually beyond the reach of the respectable; too often the readiest talkers are the biggest bores; they are over-concerned with their own reputations, or are too discreet, to jeopardize their amour propre in the interests of a good story. But there is none of this false shame with Lofty. The more outrageous the exploit, the more relish goes into the telling.

Now, in the dowsed lights of the bridge and with Tennholmen still invisible over the dark horizon ahead, the talk turns, as it so often does, to the war. Most fishermen in the nature of things joined the RNR and lived blameless lives in minesweepers. But not Lofty. Lofty was, for a time at least, a trooper in a mountain regiment; one of those esoteric units that have field-guns and mules and spend their time trying to persuade the latter to haul the former up and down the Cairngorms. In his jerky way, wandering between the wheel and starboard wing of the bridge, his hands tucked into the front of his dungarees, and punctuating his narrative with chuckles at his own impudence and resource, he starts to talk about it.

"Ah were on the roon for nine munth, y'know, 'Ughie."

"A deserter, you mean?"

"Nine months, ay. Ah were in this mountain regiment ah were telling you about, training to go to Norway. Living in tents, we

were, right up in the mountains in Scotland. Snow and ice and every flaming thing. Ah didn't fancy it, so Ah says to meself, we'll get out of this lot, and Ah put in for a transfer; but the Major wouldn't pass it. 'We want you here,' 'e says. 'Well, Ah don't want to be 'erc,' Ah says. 'Ah want to go into t'commandos.' But 'e wouldn't 'ave it, see. So me and this other bloke, we were proper chokker; so we decides to 'op it. We pinches a book of leave-passes out of the Sergeant-Major's office, and we chunters off." A convulsive chuckle. "We gets to the station, see; and the first bloke we booms into is the Sergeant-Major. Flaming 'ell! 'Just coming back off leave, Smith?' he says. 'I'm expecting transport. I'll give you a lift back to camp.' 'Very good of you, Sergeant-Major, old chap' . . . like 'ell you will, Ah says to meself, and Ah nips into the gents.'

By this time their train was just about to leave. Lofty went into the gents, and over the wall on the far side, and made a dash for the last carriage as the train moved off. His chum, pretending he had left something behind, was already on board. And so, as casually as that, they shook the pebbles of the mountain regiment out of their boots and set off for the Midlands.

In Leeds, and later in Manchester, they lived on their wits and a judicious use of forged leave-passes. Every trade was short of people and they found work in dairies and steelworks and a variety of other places. They continued to wear uniform, and inevitably they had their narrow escapes.

"Wun day," Lofty continued, "soom bastard pinched me cap-badge in a pub. Well, Ah went out and boomed straight into a couple of redcaps. 'Eh, you! Where's your cap-badge?'

" 'Bin pinched.'

" 'Oh ay. Where you stationed?'

"This was in Manchester, sec. Well, Ah knew there were a camp of soom sort at Altrincham, so that's what Ah told him. So the bloke says: 'Raight. You nip off back to camp and get another one, quick.' So Ah says Ay-Ay, and off I goes. Ah'd seen

a buz marked Altrincham joost before; but Ah couldn't remember which way it was going. So Ah tossed for it, and went to the stop joost across the road and waited. And Ah waited and Ah waited and no buz come, and there's these two redcaps standing watching me! Well, after a bit, one of 'em come across and 'e says: 'Where did you say you were stationed?' So Ah told 'im. 'Let's 'ave a look at your pass.' 'Aven't got a pass. Ah'm on duty.' " Lofty chuckled. " 'Escort Duty. Joost on ma way back.' The bustards didn't know whether to believe me or not, so Ah began to get a bit stroppey, put it on a bit, like. 'Ring oop if you don't believe me,' Ah said. 'What d'you think Ah am? A bloody deserter or some flaming thing!' Joost then, a buz cooms round the corner, and Ah 'ops on it and away. But it were a near thing, 'Ughie!"

I don't know if it was pressure from his mother, or the fact that his uniform was getting shabbier and shabbier, or that he had run out of leave-passes—or whether, in fact, he was finally caught—but, as he told it, he finally gave himself up and did ninety days in the Glasshouse. The best of the story, however, was that the MP's he surrendered to were the ones to whom, a week or two previously, he had said with an air of enormously aggrieved innocence: "What d'you think Ah am? A bloody deserter or some flaming thing!"

That was Lofty's story, anyway.

We return to our independent study of the dark sea and the fitful starlight that flickers between sudden, rushing squalls; squalls which still send the spray driving over the whaleback like smoke, although with every mile up the narrowing jaws of the fjord the motion of the sea diminishes.

The thin snow blows clear, and there, down on the water, a light blinks. "That's Tennholmen now," says Lofty, and goes down to tell the Skipper.

"The Enemy" Comes Aboard

AT 1.0 in the morning we pick up the glimmer of the leading-light that marks the channel, port-hand to Lødingen, starboard-hand to Narvik. Baroy light, like many of those in the fjords, is in sectors, showing us a fixed white light as we approach, occulting as we alter course to port, white as we leave it astern. Although he has made this tricky passage so often that he knows it by heart, the Skipper must bring to it each time the same care and concentration. Snow-showers, as blinding as fog, sweep down over the mountains, and in a few seconds the lights of the town, the lights that mark the channel, are obliterated. Even the radar, locked in among the hills, produces a frantic muddle of echoes from which it is difficult to elucidate the channel.

As suddenly as it descended, the squall passes. There are the sparse, midnight lamps of the little town ahead of us, and all around the hills like snoozing whales. Between black rags of cloud, the stars glitter out of a pale, pellucid, auroral shine, colourless and diffused.

There is the stir and bustle, the change of tempo, of arrival, linking this glimmering brief visitation with a hundred others in other ports along the fringes of other seas. The engine-room telegraph gives its double jangle as the Skipper reduces to Half Ahead and then to Slow; on the whaleback the Mate is standing by the anchor-windlass. We shall not put in nor go alongside; we shall barely pause in our voyage; we can expect no mail to give arrival an importance. There is just the single light that detaches itself from the others ashore while we lie motionless and still in the starlight, the rattle of engines and a swirl of waters as the pilot cutter comes alongside. The two pilots clamber over the

rail with their suitcases; laconic greetings on the bridge; a course to steer; and we are on our way again at full speed.

In the darkness Lofty winks and mutters behind his hand: "The enemy's aboard, eh, 'Ughie?"—a remark so cryptic that I can think of no suitable reply.

SEVEN

Through the Fjords

"WE'LL have a drop of Haig, shall we?" says the Skipper, and fishes the bottle out from under his pillow where he keeps it, not for convenience but for safety. The amount of liquor a ship may carry in bond—i.e., duty-free—is sharply limited by Insurance regulations; though a skipper may take a case or two of beer to sea with him if he pleases. The broaching of the first bottle of duty-free Haig is an appropriately symbolic event to mark our landfall and the fact that for the next twenty-four hours the ship is in the hands of our two Norwegian pilots.

We are an hour on our way from Lødingen, and the Skipper has already satisfied himself on that point. "They're pretty good, most of 'em," he says when we are settled back on the scat-lockers, "but I don't like them too young. They put me ashore along here once, you know. Ay, they did. I was in the *Borella*; it was Christmas trip and bitterly cold. You'll have heard them talking about this black frost?" I nodded. Of all the perils of the arctic winter, this is the one fishermen fear most. It seems to be the result of high humidity and very low temperatures, and takes the form of a freezing fog which very quickly builds up dangerously heavy icing on the ship's rigging and upper-works. If there are seas coming aboard at the same time the spray will freeze as well, faster than it can be hacked away, and in a short time the ship will be carrying enough top-weight to capsize her.

THROUGH THE FJORDS

"Not everything you hear described as black frost," the Skipper continued, "is black frost in fact; but if you do strike it, it's nasty. On this particular trip, we were running off, just as we are now; we'd picked up our pilots, and we were about an hour out of Lødingen when we hit it. It was really thick; visibility was down to a matter of yards; it was freezing hard and pitch dark, of course, and we were reduced to Dead Slow.

"I told you I didn't like young pilots. Well, the two I had this time were young; and when we ran into this stuff we were just coming up to the Narrows, and I could tell they weren't happy about it. They had their heads together over the radar and there was a lot of gabbling and whispering going on; they were at loggerheads, you could tell. Then one of them says something a bit sharp, like, and stops the engines. You don't like to interfere; they're supposed to know their job; but you don't like the feeling that your ship isn't being properly handled: after all, it doesn't matter how many pilots you've got on board, it's your ship and your responsibility."

The engines were stopped and the ship was drifting blind in the murk when the Skipper suddenly glimpsed an impalpable densening of the blackness ahead and grabbed the telegraph; but before he could ring her astern the cliffs were hanging above the whale-back and with a jerk she struck.

"It's a shocking feeling, that," he continued. "You try and think what you've done wrong and what you should have done instead and all the time you know it's too late. The harm's done. We were aground all right; we were practically ashore and in among the trees; but when I came to sound all round the ship, I discovered we were only touching in one spot on the starboard side. There must have been some kind of a ledge just there with deep water all round; and the propeller was clear. When I'd checked and discovered that, I felt a bit better; I knew there was a chance of getting her off. So I rang down full astern, and after a bit she began to shift. You could feel her gradually working herself off;

and then, all of a sudden she layed right over on her beam ends and the water came sloshing into the wing of the bridge and I thought she was going to turn over. But as she slid into deep water, so she righted herself, and I knew we were clear.

"She didn't appear to be making any water; but we put into Harstad—we shall see the lights about 5.0 in the morning—just to be on the safe side, and a diver went down and had a look and reported that we'd only scratched the paint; so off we went to White Sea and got 2000 kit.

"He can only have taken a hurried look, though, because when the ship went in for survey six months later they found half-a-dozen of her plates were buckled and had to replace them!"

The Skipper chuckled, and one of the pilots put his head inquiringly round the curtain and entered. He was a man of about thirty-seven with a very definite, deeply-lined face, a big nose and a rather bitter mouth and eyes that missed nothing. He had taken Laurie through before, and we talked for a little politely about the fishing and the other ships that had recently gone through and how early the snow was this year.

"And how is Skipper Dreevers?" asked the pilot, and Laurie laughed. "Oh, he's retired," he said.

"Retired?"

"Ay. He's given it up." This was quite untrue. Bill Dreevers is one of the top skippers in the company, but a week or two before, the Norwegians had suspected him of doing a bit of poaching somewhere up Sletnes way, and they were on the look-out for him. The pilot looked mystified, and Laurie winked at me. He has had trouble with the limit-line in his time.

The conversation turned to the pilot-service. Before the war, pilotage through the fjords was voluntary, and although most skippers took advantage of it, it was a private business and only cost a fiver. There was intense competition between the pilots themselves. Now the whole thing has been nationalized; two pilots are compulsory; they are governed by strict regulations

THROUGH THE FJORDS

and equipped with several forms; and, needless to say, the single journey costs forty-five pounds. The pilot made a wry face. "But we don't get much more," he said. "It goes to the government."

Soon he excused himself, and after a little persuasion, took the bunk and turned in.

There is little love lost between deep-sea fishermen and either the Icelanders or the Norwegians—that, I learnt, was the interpretation of Lofty's remark about "the enemy"—but it is difficult to discover the reasons why, for the Norwegians, if not the Icelanders, have a reputation for friendliness. There is rivalry, of course, and occasional friction between trawlers and the local line-fishermen, particularly near the limit; but this alone is not enough to account for it. Is it simple xenophobia? Or the kind of defensiveness one might expect of men who spend most of their time fishing off other people's coasts?

There is, I suspect, something of each of these behind it; but more, there is the unexpressed feeling that it was the British trawlerman who discovered and pioneered the distant-water grounds, round Iceland even before the turn of this century, the Norwegian coast, Bear Island and the White Sea in the ensuing years—just as today he is extending his search for fish to the coast of Greenland—only to find himself being gradually legislated out of them by countries who came late into the game but whose shores are closest. It was the Norwegians who first made good their claim before the Hague Court to draw the limit of their territorial waters not three miles from the coast, following the contour of all but the narrower bays, but four miles, and from headland to headland. Whereupon, of course, Iceland and the Faeroes followed suit, the former with threats of twelve (or, in their giddier moments, even sixty) miles from land.

There has been much specious argument on both sides during the three or four years of this dispute, and much bitterness as well. The fact remains that Iceland skippers, in particular, lost a

number of inshore grounds which they were accustomed to fish with profit, and which, because they were under the lee of the land, could often be fished when it was blowing too hard offshore. Because they had fished them for years, they felt a proprietary right in them; but they were arrested—and disproportionately fined as well—just the same, even when nobody but the government concerned recognized the legality of the new limits. It is this, more than anything else, I think, that has caused the wretched Scandinavians to be referred to generically as “Scrubs”, “Skin-feet”, “Square-headed bastards” and “The Enemy”; but, like so many of these almost reflexive antipathies, it sounds far angrier than it really is. Ships put into Icelandic and Norwegian ports on occasion for food and fuel, for repairs and medical aid; the agents come aboard and the crews go ashore, and amity prevails.

The enemy of the moment, the pilot, has retired behind the bunk curtains, and we surreptitiously produce our glasses from their hiding-places. “They’re all right,” Laurie says, “if you don’t let them run you. But if you’re not careful they’re always on the cadge—fags, fag-papers, razor-blades, any old thing. I just let them know that I’m still master of my own ship. Then they’re all right.”

He breaks off to nip up on the bridge, but is down again in a couple of minutes. “We’re just going through the Narrows now; but we’re all right. It’s clear in between the showers.”

“Did you come back through the fjords that trip you ran aground?” I asked.

“Ay, we did—and that wasn’t the end of it, either. We left Lødingen on the way home and ran straight out into a sou’westerly gale. It took us twenty-three hours to reach Traen Islands: we did it in twelve just now; so that will give you an idea. Anyway, I realized then we were going to be short of coal, so I decided to make straight across to Aberdeen. We had a shocking run; blew like hell all the way; I had to ease her right down and dodge; we were so long it was doubtful if we had

THROUGH THE FJORDS

enough coal to see us into Aberdeen even. The deadline—I shall never forget it—was 8 o'clock in the morning. I knew if we hadn't sighted the coast by then, we shouldn't make it."

The Skipper paused, and I thought of the old coal-burner plunging and staggering through the bitter December weather, and the light seeping back into a world of driving sleet and spray; the men, tired out with anxiety and the strain of five days of ceaseless gales; the firemen and the old Chief watching the level in the bunkers drop and drop; and all of them quietly reckoning the possibilities: adrift in that wind and sea; keeping her head up, if they could, with an improvised sea-anchor until somebody picked up their SOS and came struggling out to take them in tow; or a big sea came along and knocked her down and the icy water sluiced in through the battered skylights: eyes pinched against the opaque and splintered light. . . .

They picked up Rattray at a quarter to eight, but even then their worries weren't over. Aberdeen harbour is guarded by a sand-bar, and comparatively deep-draught vessels can only cross it at the top of the tide, and not always then if the wind is on the land. If they arrived off the harbour-entrance with no coal and couldn't get in, they would be in a very awkward situation indeed. So they called up the shore on the radio and learnt that 1.0 p.m. was the latest they could hope to enter.

They crossed the bar at 12.55!

It was two days before Christmas, and everybody had abandoned any hope of being home for Christmas Eve; but once they were tied up alongside, they found everything laid on: coal, provisions, even a case of beer for the crew: and they were able to get away on the next tide. The pilot came aboard and they cast off; but he was unused to ships of that type and size and he had the wind, which was holding her to, to contend with; and it was the best part of half-an-hour before they were clear of the wall.

When they eventually got outside, it was to find that the

weather had eased; and the Chief went up on the bridge with the suggestion that if he put her on wet steam, they might just make the tide and be in for Christmas Eve. The Skipper agreed; and the Chief potted back to his engine-room, and the engines chuntered round as fast as he could make them go, and the sea was as calm as a mill-pond, and everybody was cheerful with the thought of being home for Christmas Eve.

As one approaches St. Andrew's Dock, there is an arrangement of lights which tells returning trawlers whether the lock-gates are open or shut. If a green light is burning, it means that the gates are open; if a red, that they are shut, either because the tide has not made sufficiently yet, or because it has already ebbed too long. As *Borella* raced up the Humber and round the bend of the river towards the dock, all eyes were strained for the lights above the lock-gates. They had not a moment in hand: if no green light was showing, it meant only one thing: they were too late.

As they steamed up the last stretch, at last they could see it. It was red! They had missed the tide by exactly half-an-hour.

Depressed and miserable, they went back into the warmth of the mess-deck and started a game of crib. They had not been at it long when one of the trimmers, a solid, unexcitable character by the name of Feeve, poked his head round the door and announced in his slow voice:

"D'you know, 'Atch 'as gone?"

Hatch was one of the stokers, but the news, whatever it meant, made no great stir.

"Gone?" said someone. "Gone where?"

"Over t'side," says Feeve.

"Gone over t'side! What d'yer mean?"

"'E's gone over t'side, I'm telling yer."

There was a rush to the door, then, while Feeve added plaintively:

"'E's swimming ashore."

They got a lifebelt over, and for a time they heard him calling

in the dark; but the tide runs out at eight knots at full ebb, and he was never seen again.

When the tale was finished, we sat silent for a time until Laurie asked: "I suppose that sort of thing sounds a bit dramatic to you? That sort of trip, I mean."

"It seems to have had its moments," I said cautiously.

"The point is, I don't want you to think I'm shooting a line. Any of the yarns I tell you—and they're all true—any skipper can tell you the same. If you go to sea, you know yourself, you get gales, you get breakdowns, you get caught out sometimes. You must do, working as we work. In winter, especially round Bear Island, it can be bad. There's no doubt about it. And it can be as bad in the North Sea at times, too, if it gives its mind to it." He smiled. "There's nothing wrong with this, though, is there?"

The ship thrust on between the dark hills with hardly a tremor; and after a time we settled ourselves to sleep.

EIGHT

Mountains and Open Water

ALL night and throughout the following day we continued to wind through the fjords. Except at dawn, when the sky in the south-east erupted behind the hills in billows of flame-coloured cloud, the landscape remained uncompromisingly black and white. Yet it was never dull. As we followed the channel through half the points of the compass we were steaming now through a broad loch two or three miles across, now threading a passage no wider than the Thames at Richmond; the pattern and texture of the mountains was continually altering, the higher slopes as smooth and white as ski-runs, the lower lying in folds and sprinkled and speckled with snow. On these the sparse black firs stood up exactly like the bristles on a hog's back.

CAPE OF STORMS

Low down, along the water's edge, small farmsteads consisting of a trim and gaily-painted wooden house, a stable, a patch of cleared ground, formed a kind of tenuous ribbon development for mile after lonely mile. Towns, or even the semblances of a community, were few and far between, and one felt that the Norwegians must be the most independent and non-gregarious of peoples.

Overhead the clouds were infected with that incomparable smooth softness of imminent snow, and from time to time obliterating showers swept down on us, the snowflakes fleeing across the water, over the deck, horizontally, like darting flights of small white birds.

A month ago, so one of the pilots was saying, all the reindeer, which had spent the summer pasturing on the islands which form the seaward side of the fjords, were collected together and swum across to the mainland. Only twice in twenty years had he ever witnessed this sight which, like the celebrations in November which mark the setting of the sun for the last time, is one of the turning points of the year. Already, in mid-October, under lowering skies and with daylight abbreviated to a mere eight hours one could feel the compulsion of the Arctic winter.

By contrast, the summer has a kind of anarchy about it; and in Iceland in June, when the daylight had gone on and on with hardly a variation in intensity from midnight to midnight, one seemed to suffer a tireless disorientation in which clocks, with their idle reports of 2.0 a.m. in broad daylight, began to lose their spell.

To the stranger from more rigid latitudes, both the excess of light and the excess of darkness are uncongenial; and often later on, when the daylight petered out at half past one, Lauric used to say: "That's what I hate about the winter up here—the endless darkness. It gets you down, especially in dirty weather. It's not so bad when you can see what's coming at you!" Interminable dark and unvarying cold require a special kind of fortitude, a pre-requisite for polar explorers and deep-sea fishermen.

After breakfast, Jim, the Chief Engineer, came up on the bridge. In so far as he wore a singlet and dungarees and a clean string-net dish-cloth round his neck—and looked, therefore, almost indecently under-clothed among the jerseys and clumpers—he was unmistakably an engineer. But Jim always capped his working rig with a small green fez, and this in conjunction with his smooth, sallow complexion and black hair, gave him a slightly exotic air, as if his true berth was in a paddle-steamer running up the Nile to Khartoum; and one expected to find his engine-room full of Lascars or hulking Sudanese.

He and the Skipper exchanged good mornings. That was usually the extent of their conversation, for among the Skipper's idiosyncrasies is one which maintains that engineers have no place on the bridge. "How would they like it," he would demand rhetorically, "if I was always down their engine-rooms, poking my nose into their drip-feeds and gauges, eh? They wouldn't like it; and I don't like them on my bridge." It was idle to point out that there was a difference in kind: a Skipper's prejudices are law. (Another of his obiter dicta was: "Ask an engineer to mend a fuse and he always turns up with: an oil-can, a wad of waste, a bloody big hammer and an iron bar!")

On this occasion, however, the Chief was unarmed and on business. The joint on one of the cylinder-heads was leaking. Would the Skipper stop for an hour, whenever it was convenient, to give them a chance to whip the head off and repack it.

"Ay," said the Skipper. "We'll put into Tromsø. We'll be there about 10.30."

"OK," said the Chief, and taking an unhurried, yet, one felt, illicit look round at the scenery, disappeared below.

Soon we were steaming up the broad, open reach of Tromsø Fjord and passing in the distance to port a floating-crane, the only remaining sign of the final resting-place of the *Tirpitz*. After the Barracudas, the midget-submarines and the Lancasters, the ship-breakers have had the last word; and her guns, so the pilots

told us, now appropriately guard the approaches to the town from concealed positions on the seaward cliffs, while the steel from her hull and upperworks has gone back to Germany to make Volkswagens, or, who knows, another *Tirpitz*.

Tromsø itself is built on the slopes of a low island, looking eastward across the sound to the mainland, and is reminiscent with its prim wooden houses and snowy streets of a Canadian lakeside town. Ashore in driving snow, the children were already hurtling down the steep streets on toboggans, while even the prams were mounted on runners instead of wheels. The houses, of wood or concrete, are all painted in pleasant pastel colours, pale greens and reds and blues. I remembered Reykjavik, where no attempt has been made to mitigate the brutality of raw concrete and the ugly little streets look unkempt and unloved. Tromsø, by comparison, has a comfortable, carcd-for appearance, enhanced at this particular season, perhaps, by the oddity of trees in the squares in full leaf through the eddying snowflakes. This alone is enough to differentiate it from Iceland, where a few haggard shrubs, cowering in the lee of the houses, constitute the sole vegetation.

It was a pity about the snow, for *Brucella*, tied up alongside the low coaling jetty, presented the wonderful flare of her bowsideally for a photograph; but behind the heavy clouds and driving flakes the light was already going, and I missed my only chance.

The Chief was ready within the hour, and we cast off and resumed our passage north and east. With darkness, and open water to port, we had a hint of the weather we were missing outside. At Honningsvåg, our immediate destination, there were reports of N-NE gales, force 8; and even in the comparatively sheltered waters of the leads the ship was beginning to feel the swell. We passed Soroya Island in a monochrome, twilight gloom in which the formless screes went veering up into the mist; and at their foot the scattered lights shone with almost unendurable warmth and isolation. It was on Soroya that Otto Larsen spent

CONTEXTS

two winters during the German occupation doing espionage work for the Russians, and from Soroya, when the promised submarine had twice failed to come and pick them up and he and his companions had been betrayed, that they made their way across almost impassable country to the Swedish border and so into safety. For some unimportant indiscretion during interrogation in Sweden he was arrested by the Russians when, after the war, he went back to Murmansk to claim his brother's boat, and was sent to slave labour for ten years.

I had read his laconic and terrifying account* of these transactions not long before leaving England. If it had curdled the blood there, the recollection of it was invested with a grim vividness as the names became translated into the wintry shape of a mountain half-glimpsed through snow and spray, a stretch of rough open water, a frontier not far away behind the mountains to the eastward.

I asked the pilot if he had known him, for he too came from Finmark in the north. He knew of him; "But now he is dead," he added. "He died in Sweden as a result of what he had suffered." So he had had only two years after the long-drawn-out anguish of release: his death was like a personal grief, and I felt black anger flood through me at the men who take a life—brief as it is, uncertain in its joy and yet so sweet—and break it like a rotten stick. Is there no end to man's capacity for hate?

NINE

Contexts

HAMMERFEST, a brooch of lights through the bleary dark, was already astern. The duty pilot was in the wing of the bridge, brooding over the radar. Ahead, through the sleet, a light low

* *Nightmare of the Innocents* by Otto Larsen. Published by Andrew McIlrose.

down on the water performed its double blink every ten seconds: to me a meagre guide through the twisting channels; to the pilot a bend in a well-known road, as explicit as a sign-post.

"Steer north-east and a half east!"

The wheel spun under the helmsman's hands, and the ship moved round the compass card in the deckhead. The pilot checked the new course and moved away to resume his scrutiny of the radar-screen.

It is one of the sharpest pleasures of any journey to be reminded that one's own context is normal only for oneself and some small fraction of the human race; unless, of course, one is so blasé that one is inclined to murmur with Horace Walpole, writing from Florence: "I have left off screaming 'Lord! this!' and 'Lord! that!'" To speak sincerely, Calais surprised me more than anything I have seen since. The farther I travel, the less I wonder at anything." From an igloo on the edge of the ice-pack to the deafening, stinking claustrophobia of a big city, man, one concludes, can accept almost anything as normal. It is normal for a West Indian labourer to live in a hut made of old packing-cases and roofed with grass, to drink neat rum and live on rice and salt cod and mangoes, and to sit in the shade gambling; and it is normal for the inhabitants of Northern Norway to live in crofts on the edge of a cold sea, to rely on the mail-boat for news and the local "snibbies" for transport, and to endure almost total darkness for four months of the year. In the same way, it is normal for a deep-sea fisherman to spend twenty-one days out of every twenty-three in a small ship on its way to or from, or cruising slowly up and down, unfrequented and inhospitable miles of ocean; and he accepts it as such. It is the context of his life.

Ringelly, who has the wheel, has this philosophy of acceptance weighed off. He is a tall, spare man in his thirties, with a smooth face and wavy brown hair. He would say: "You 'ave your oops and downs, like," in his pleasant, rather husky voice; and this would mean that before joining this ship in the summer, he had

had seven bad months in another of the same company's. He disliked the ship and the skipper, and he had had a run of ill-luck which culminated, during a prolonged and wretched trip to Greenland, in an injured knee that had taken months to mend. Now things have looked up. He has confidence in the ship and the skipper, and has regained it in himself; he rarely grumbles about the job, and does it with an efficiency and economy of effort which invest even the squalid business of gutting with a certain ease and grace.

Like most trawlermen, he spins a good yarn, and his tale of a voyage in 1940 from Ilfracombe to the Forth, via Dunkirk, in a paddle-steamer, the *Devonia*, has the full flavour of those dire, haphazard days. The *Devonia* was an ex-sixpenny-sicker, and although she had a good turn of speed, however much coal they packed aboard her, she still had to be refuelled every twenty-four hours. This limitation proved embarrassing when they found themselves off the Dunkirk beaches. Even there, however, they succeeded in finding fuel for her insatiable furnaces, and after disembarking their "passengers" at Dover, proceeded on their way north. She was getting on in years, though, and the indignities of war proved gradually too much for her. On one occasion, a deckhand, despatched to the galley for tea, opened the galley-door to find himself looking straight down on to the wet and whirling paddle-wheel. The galley, which was built out on the casing, had vanished!

Talk turns from the war back to fishing. One of the sorest points at issue between fishermen and owners is the forty-eight hour turn-round. From the owners' point of view, a ship in port is a liability, earning nothing and running up harbour dues instead. From the fisherman's point of view, a bare forty-eight hours at home in every three weeks is all too little; and a year or two ago they decided to try and get it increased. Their proposals were turned down; whereupon it was decided by the union to hold a strike. But the very point which was at issue prevented

them from putting the threat into action. So short is the men's time ashore, and so comparatively small the number of men available at any given moment—and, at a guess, so lukewarm are they towards the union itself—that the leaders were never even able to hold a sufficiently representative meeting to come to a decision. The proposals are still very much alive, however; and it seems fairly certain that as crews become harder to find the owners will eventually have to give way.

It is not as if trawlermen are in fact so well paid, by contemporary standards. A deckhand gets a basic wage of £7 a week. On top of this, he receives a 5 per cent share of the gross earnings of the voyage, which on an average trip may amount to £25 or £30 for the three weeks, plus a share of "liver-money", the money, that is, made by the cod and haddock liver-oil. Depending on the season and the quality of the fish, this may vary between £2 and £10. At the end of an average trip to White Sea or Bear Island during the winter months, therefore, he cannot draw less than about £20—even if the catch makes nothing at all—and may well draw £60 or £65.

Out of this he has to pay tax, his bond-bill on board, and—more formidable than either of these—his current bill at the clothing-store for boots (at over £3 a pair), oilskin frocks, gloves, jerseys, seaboot stockings, knives and so forth. The wear and tear on all of these during ten days' fishing means frequent replacement.

The "sharemen", the Skipper and the Mate, work on a completely different basis. They are paid no basic wage: the money they make depends exactly on how much fish they catch and how much it sells for in the market. From the gross earnings of the trip—say £6000—the running expenses are deducted. Although these do not include the cost of gear, depreciation and various other capital liabilities, they will probably amount to £3000. From the nett sum that remains, the Skipper draws 10 per cent, the Mate rather less. If they are unlucky enough to land

on a market in which there is a glut, or they are the last of a dozen ships which have all docked on the same tide, or their catch is of indifferent quality, or if for any other reason their voyage makes very little or nothing at all, they may well find themselves in debt: literally, for every married man makes an allotment out of his earnings—in the case of sharemen, out of their hypothetical earnings—and this is paid automatically. Since the war, particularly, it is comparatively rare for a ship to end up a trip in debt; but it can happen, and does.

Since everything concerning the voyage—the quality of the fish, the kind of fish and the amount caught, the time away, the market we shall eventually go for, and the progress of other ships—affects its outcome, they establish the climate, the emotional climate, in which we shall live during the coming fortnight. Each in turn, sometimes several together, will come to assume overwhelming importance, lacerating our nerves with doubts and misgivings. Trivial to a landsman, their urgency can only be judged within the setting of the voyage and its purpose.

By the time we reach Honningsvåg they are already upon us.

TEN

Rumours of Gales

HONNINGSVÅG in driving snow at a quarter to four in the morning looked like a crater of the moon. The clutch of the anchor-windlass jammed as we ghosted up, all ready to let go, a cable's length away from a couple of Russian trawlers, and provoked the Skipper into one of his rare outbursts of wrath. For a few minutes, as we lay motionless, we had a vignette of a small group of figures crouched on the whaleback, wrestling with the thing under the glare of one of the bridge floodlights. Then it was freed, and the chain went clanking out over the monkey.

CAPE OF STORMS

The snow-shower blew over; and above the soft rolling banks of cloud, a patch of greenish light hinted at dawn. The pilots stood together, staring over the water, stamping their feet, and repeatedly hooting on the ship's siren for a boat to take them ashore.

"We'll wait till daylight, anyway," says the Skipper; and to Sparks: "See if you can contact anyone. Find out what it's like outside. I'd say it's blowing a gale myself."

By 10.30 Sparks has had a chat with *Southella*, who reports that she took two very heavy seas aboard during the night which nearly stove her bridge in, and with *Mariner*, one of the Fishery Cruisers, who also talks of gales and heavy swell off North Cape. Sparks has also made contact with the *Lord Hawke*, who is homeward bound with 2000 kit in and spent last night dodging. They were chuckled about enough to burst several steam-joints and a fuel-pipe.

"Thanks for the report," says Laurie, settled into the chair in the wireless room with the microphone. He is not an RT-addict, but Eager Teager, *Lord Hawke's* Skipper, is a friend of his, and this trip he has things on his mind. "Cheerful as ever!" and there is a chuckle of laughter from the receiver. "Last time I called you up, when we were running off, I said to the Mate: 'If you believe what Eager Teager tells you, the best thing you can do is turn round and go home!' "

He is persuaded, nevertheless. "We'll stay in for a bit longer," he says, coming back on to the bridge and looking sourly at the lowering sky. "If you're out there, it's different. If it blows up, you make the best of it. But if you're in harbour, you tend to wait until it moderates. I mean, what's the point in going out and getting a good shaking-up, and then having to lay because it's too bad to fish? We might just as well stay where we are."

He laughs, a little self-consciously in a way he has, as if he feels he is destroying some preconceived idea of a hard-case trawler-

FLATS?

skipper in my mind. "We're not as tough as we used to be. Not by a long way. To hell with it. If I find myself in Honningsvaag in weather like this, I know when I'm well off and stay put!"

And stay put we did, until 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

ELEVEN

Flats?

THE Skipper is a man of moods. He has something of the intuition which is the result of knowledge and experience and yet more than either, and which makes one man a better fisherman than another. Like poetic inspiration, it is an essence, a distillation, of both; an expertise, like the flair of the draughtsman or the green fingers of the gardener. It cannot be taught or bought, or even very satisfactorily described; worse, it tends to be elusive, or to seem so, just when it is most needed. This is one of those moments.

Many skippers follow the herd. They, or their operators, are for ever on the RT, monitoring the interminable conversations between other skippers for what they reveal and tagging on to any group of ships that appears to be catching fish. Laurie prefers to obey his own intuition when it comes to deciding where to go and what to fish for. It is a matter for decision, make no doubt of that. There are about a hundred thousand square miles of sea in the area bounded by North Cape and Bear Island to the west to Novaya Zemlya in the east, and there are grounds distributed all over it. The quality of the fish varies from ground to ground, and the quantity from season to season. The kind of voyage a ship makes is partly decided beforehand, by where the skipper makes for, and partly decided by what happens when he gets there; for this type of fishing is nothing if not empirical. A Bear Island trip, it is safe to say, will consist almost exclusively of "rough

stuff", cod, in fact, preferably in enormous quantities. A West Side (of Iceland) trip should contain a balance between rough stuff and prime—halibut, plaice, soles. A White Sea trip like ours will normally be composed of cod and haddocks in a proportion which varies tremendously but, with luck, should run out at about four to one. But there are also plaice in the White Sea; plaice which have been troubling our dreams ever since we left the dock.

Plaice—otherwise known as "flats"—keep better than round stuff, having no guts to speak of, and fetch a far better price: as much as £10 per kit, as opposed to a maximum of about £5 per kit for haddocks and £3 10s. od. for cod. It may therefore be a paying proposition to lay in four or five hundred kit of plaice—if they are to be found—right at the start of the voyage, ice them down, and then fill the fish-room up with "swag". On the other hand, plaice grounds in the White Sea are few and far away; the one which Laurie has in mind is thirty-six hours' steaming from where we are now, and, being in shallow water, tends to build up a dirty sea very quickly if there is a blow. Three or four days spent looking for plaice, three or four days on the length of the voyage, may well cancel out the extra money they will make—if we catch any. Three or four days on to the length of the voyage if we don't catch any are simply time and money lost.

There are a dozen factors of this sort which the skipper has to resolve every trip; and as we lie to our anchor, weatherbound within the wintry basin of Honningsvåg harbour, he puzzles them out. One by one he goes over them: the weather, steaming-time, the chances of finding any flats if we do go ("I've caught 'em on that same spot in October before"); where we should move to, if we do go east, afterwards.

"It all sounds very nice when you and the Boss have a chat about it in the office before you leave. But you can't catch fish in the office."

Sparks appears at the doorway, his face set in the particular, ingratiating smile he wears for bad news, a glitter in his eye.

"Just been having a natter with *Magnolia*, Skipper. He's out to the east after flats."

"Ay. Is he catching anything?"

"He reports disappointing catches and gales."

"There you are, you see," Laurie says, addressing nobody in particular. "That's what happens."

"Oh," Sparks adds brightly, "and *Lord Alexander* landed twenty-four hundred kit yesterday; six hundred of flats. Made over ten thousand."

"You're a cheerful bastard, Sparks! God Almighty! When the Boss hears that, he'll be rubbing his hands and thinking: 'I was right to send *Brucella* east after a bit of plaice.' And here are we, sitting scratching our heads in Honningsvaag! D'you wonder skippers look so worried?"

"It's easing outside," says Sparks. "*Arctic Invader's* just pushed off."

"Has he! Then I suppose we'd better be thinking of making a move ourselves. Thanks, Sparks."

Sparks vanishes, and for a moment his necrotic grin seems to hang in the gap between the curtain and the door-post.

"But where to? That's the bugbear," says the Skipper, and plonks his cap on his head and goes up on to the bridge to look at the weather.

TWELVE

Night like a Troop of Horse

Arctic Invader, running off like ourselves, has gone. *Kingston Turquoise*, somewhere to the north-east, on Skolpen Bank, has started fishing. The wind has moderated, leaving behind it, so reports say, a decent swell. But what, after all, is a spot of swell? At a quarter to two in the thickening dark we weigh and proceed.

CAPE OF STORMS

Flurries of wind rattle down over the hills and harry the gun-metal water this way and that; and I remember sharply innumerable wet and windy war-time evenings in the Clyde, with the squalls whipping across the firth and the gleam of wet ironwork and the straight, shining streets of Helensburgh across the water; remember, too, crossing the Bequia channel from St Vincent in a sloop one blowy trade-wind afternoon, and old Christmas, the Skipper, with one horny black foot, like a tortoise, on the tiller, crying "Flars!" as the gusts rushed towards us across the blue water, and the boat's ancient spars and canvas groaned and shivered, and the two young negro girls squealed with terror among the goats and chickens up for'ard. The sea is a wonderful remembrancer, days of calm and days of storm evoking other, similar days, all burning vividly in one's memory.

As the anchor came out of the bottom and the telegraph jangled and the bow began to swing round to the east, the lonely little town drifted past with its symmetrical rows of lights, the long low silhouette of the fisherman's college out on the headland between North Honningsvaags and South. All day there has been activity round the timber ship that dragged her anchor and was driven ashore under the town; but she was still there, listing deeply to port.

"His accommodation's under water, poor bastard," said Laurie as we passed. "They'll salvage her, but it'll be expensive." He paused for a moment, then added: "Sad thing."

The lights drop astern. Ahead of us, across the sound, a block of level black cliffs juts out of the sea under a glowering thunder-light.

"Keep her south," says the Skipper; and Les at the wheel echoes him.

"Keep her south!"

"Sou'-sou'-east!"

"Sou'-sou'-east!"

"South-east!"

"South-east!"

"Keep her east!"

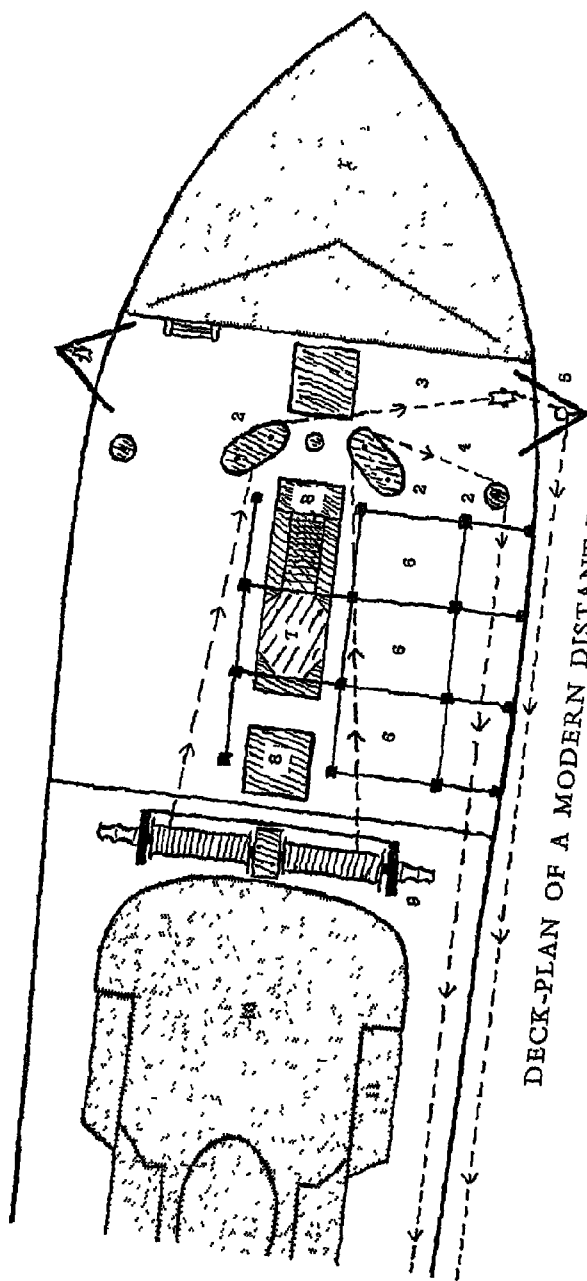
"Keep her east!"

Slowly we head for the open sea. The bow shoulders the first swell and the ship trembles. Night gathers in round us like a troop of horse. The swell increases. Wide wings of spray flash out from under the bow and spatter on the bridge windows. Spasmodically Nord Kyn throws a white fan of light up from the dark horizon. Suddenly it seems a brave thing to be plunging out into this northern sea under a sky like a black fleece.

"We'll go east as far as Vardo anyway," says Laurie, and to Sparks: "Give *Magnolia* a call in the morning and see what you can find out."

From this moment, the search is on. Technically, I suppose, until the first trawl is shot we are still running off. But now that we are clear of the fjords and out on the fringes of the Barents Sea, the greater part of our passage is over. Tomorrow, the next day at latest, we shall be fishing. And so, already Sparks has begun to live in that crackling splutter of news, gossip, rumour, bawdry, vituperation and mild obscenity of which the RT is hardly ever clear, which will continue for as long as we are fishing, and from which he will assemble a pretty clear picture of what is going on all around us. Tomorrow, the warm and un-exacting routine of bridge watches will be over, and dungarees and clumpers will be exchanged for fearnoughts and sea-boots and oilskins. There is an air of expectancy about as the long days of steaming draw to an end.

In the meantime, the Skipper keeps his own counsel; and the ship pushes on eastward over the rolling hills of the sea.



DECK-PLAN OF A MODERN DISTANT-WATER TRAWLER
(Not to scale)

- 1: Whaleback. 2: Bollards. 3: Fore warp. 4: After warp. 5: Fore gallows. 6: Pounds. 7: Washer. 8: Fish room hatches.
9: Winch. 10: Bridge superstructure. 11: Veranda. The warps lead to the after gallows and towing block.

Part Two

THE FISHING

ships were scattered upon the ocean round us, all of them trawlers, all of them fishing; and the process of identifying them was well under way.

"That must be *Lammermuir*," said Laurie, pointing to a diesel ship away to port, "and that's either *Marbella* or *Starella*."

"*Starella* sailed the day before us," said Sparks.

"Ay; that's probably who it is, then." Marr's ships are all painted buff, but the recognition of individual ships depends on characteristics far less obvious than the colour of the hull. A couple of Russians, a Grimmy, *Arctic Buccaneer* and two or three others were quickly accounted for; and then there were other matters to occupy our attention.

The ship is lying stationary, broadside to the wind, while the hands sort out the gear for the first shoot. After a time, the cod-end is hoist outboard on the starboard derrick and dropped on the run—at the Mate's yell of "Leggo!"—over the side. The belly and baitings which form the great tube of net—the part of the stocking from knee to ankle, as it were—follow. The bulk of the trawl is now in the water alongside the ship, and slowly sinking and spreading out as the wind drives us away from it. Now the foot-rope with its great necklet of rusty bobbins is hoist up on the gilson until they are resting on the rail; and as Loftly, on the winch, lowers away with a rush, everyone pushes and shoves at the bobbins and they, too, go over the side, with a crash and a clatter like the shunting of a row of empty railway trucks. That only leaves the head-line with its lighter necklet of grey aluminium floats; and when that has been hove overboard, the trawl proper is clear.

"A new set of furniture this trip," says the Skipper; and then, spotting something amiss, slams down the bridge-window to bellow: "Let it run out a bit or you'll part your becket!"

This catastrophe is averted; and with the gear in the water, he rings down for half-ahead to get it streaming, while the winch starts turning and the Dan Leno—the big steel ball at each corner

of the mouth of the trawl—and the butterfly leave the gallows followed by the thirty-five fathoms of the cable.*

With the helm hard astarboard, the ship begins to gather way in a wide circle, while over our quarter, invisible, discernible only to the practised eye by the angle at which the two wires from the gallows slice down into the water, the whole tangle of wire and rope and net sorts itself out like an opening parachute, like a drogue towed behind an aircraft.

When the cable has been paid out there is a shout from the deck, and the Skipper stops the engines. The two massive, steel-shod doors, which are hanging by their stopper chains from the head of the gallows, are shackled to the cable, are let go and dive into the sea with a belly-flopping splash. As soon as they are clear of the propeller, the Skipper rings down for full speed ahead. The revs go up quickly, and the electric winch—so quiet, so almost evilly efficient after the old familiar clankety-clank steam-donkey, so enormously powerful—starts to pay out the warps. Round the bollards they go, fathom after fathom, up over the sheave of the gallows and steeply down at a converging angle into the water. Three times warp to water is the rule of thumb; by the echometer clicking away on the after bulkhead of the bridge, we are in 100 fathoms; so something like 1200 yards of wire has to come off the barrels of the winch before the gear can safely be judged to be on the bottom.

The twelfth mark on both warps streams off round the bollards, and the winch slows down and stops. The Skipper, watching the lead of the warps, judges that the gear is towing properly, and rings down for towing revs. It only remains now to bring the warps together and lead them through the towing-block, which is secured to the side by a heavy chain on the starboard quarter. This is done by the Messenger, which is a long, light wire with a hook secured to the end of it. The hook is led over the after warp and dropped over the for'ard warp and slides down it and

* See diagram, p. 68

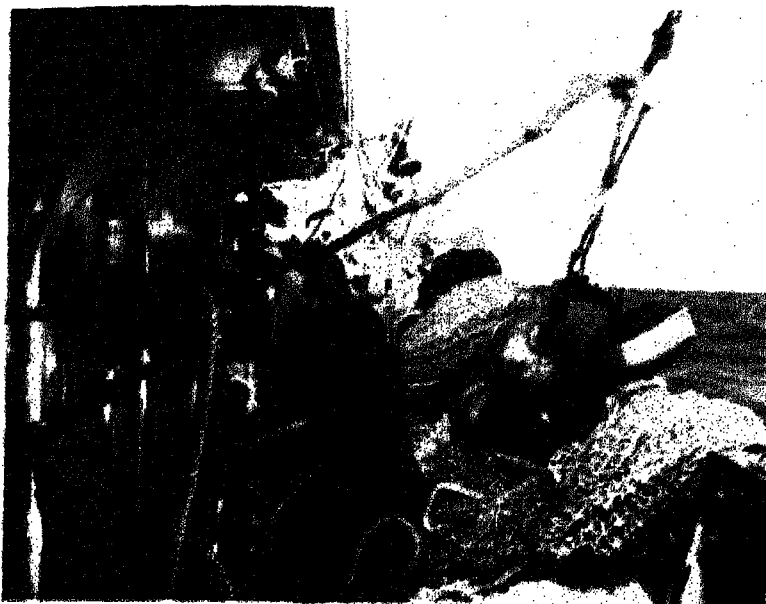
disappears into the sea. The slack of the messenger wire is taken up by the winch, and presently the hook reappears with both warps held in its bight. There is a sleight of hand about the proceedings which is fascinating, like a very simple conjuring trick which one cannot quite work out. Finally, as the messenger-wire is hauled in, it leads the warps into the jaws of the towing-block, which, like a snatch-block, has one of its cheeks hinged, and is open to receive them. As soon as they are over the sheaves of the towing-block, the open side is slammed shut and secured with a pin.

This operation, known as blocking the warps, ensures that the warps are held fast at a point sufficiently far aft to prevent them fouling the propeller; and at the shout of "All Square Aft!", shooting is successfully completed and the tow begins.

At the shout that only vaguely resembles "All Square Aft", the Skipper switches off the Tannoy and goes back to the wheel. Apart from me, and I know enough now to keep out of his way, he has the bridge to himself during shooting, and during each stage moves from the engine-room telegraph to the starboard wing of the bridge, where he has a clear view of the deck and, through the glass door, aft as well, to the wheel and back again. Now he steadies the ship on a course that should keep us in a hundred fathoms for the next couple of hours or so and relaxes.

"Well, that wasn't too bad. The first haul's one that has to be got over."

The echometer whirrs and clicks, unwinding on an ever-lengthening sheet of damp paper which dries to the colour and crispness of parchment, a profile in brown of the bottom of the sea. There are no less than three of them altogether, so we have no real excuse for not knowing the depth of water under our keel. In the old days it was a different matter: a man was sent up on to the whaleback with a hand lead-line, and finding the soundings you wanted might take several hours, and was unlikely to be very accurate at the end of it. Nowadays, you flick a switch.



Looking for'ard, starboard side. Trawl and bobbins



Gutting

"Let's see if there are any fish," Laurie says, and turns on the fish-loop. This is one of the three echometers, and by far the most ingenious and diverting; for instead of merely recording the alterations in depth on paper, it displays, on a tube like a radar screen, the actual passage of the echo from its source to the seabed, in the form of a thin, vivid green, pulsing line. Where it strikes the bottom, it spreads out wide; and if it is intercepted on the way by a shoal of fish, it reports the fact by broadening out into a bulge. The effect is pleasing, in a somewhat repetitive sort of way, and to the uninitiated virtually meaningless.

Laurie peers at it now, grunts noncommittally, and switches it off. There are bulges; there are nearly always bulges; but how useful they are either for telling us how much fish we are catching, or how to catch more, is still in debate. George, who is of the younger generation of fishermen, believes that, properly used, it should do both; but on exactly what its "proper use" is he tends to be evasive. He will only say that the Germans, who invented it, use it and catch more fish than we do. Laurie is sceptical. He gets tired of watching the dizzy green line, like a tame flash of lightning, forever flattening itself out against the bottom; he objects to the noise it makes (and, indeed, with an echometer, the fish-loop, a couple of radios and the radar going, the bridge sounds like a machine-shop); and he feels like rounding on the thing if, after an extravagant display of fish-markings during a tow, we get a slack haul at the end of it.

That it does report shoals, and even single fish, swimming through its beam is not in doubt; but the mouth of the trawl may be two hundred yards away, while the fish may be merrily making off in the opposite direction; and I have never heard it suggested that a trawler should go zigzagging about the ocean at the behest of its fish-loop. Alternatively, if the ship passes over a really heavy concentration of fish which are feeding on or near the bottom—and those are the only fish a trawler is interested in or a trawl capable of catching—part of them will probably find their

way into the cod-end without any assistance from the fish-loop. Perhaps eventually it will be replaced by underwater television cameras, incorporating the recent American discoveries in the magnification of light; scouts will cruise over the grounds at full speed while a plotting officer watches a screen on which is deployed a complete picture of the surrounding sea-bottom, and directs a team of trawlers by RT towards the unsuspecting shoals of fish. Not long after that the cod will join the salmon and the oyster on the list of the more expensive delicacies.

Those days have not arrived yet; and fish-loop or not, we rely on methods that are rather more haphazard. Certain things the Skipper knows: they are the reward of twenty-five years' experience. He knows, for instance, the most likely depths of water in which to find fish; he knows that they like to feed on a slope where a bank gradually runs off into deeper water; and he knows that they feed head to tide and that therefore he is more likely to catch them when running with the tide than when towing against it. There are many other things, too, hardly formulated even in his mind, which he knows and follows almost automatically; but, most important of all, he knows where he has caught fish before at any particular season; and only if all this accumulated knowledge fails and he gets slack haul after slack haul will he scratch his head and curse his luck, and, perhaps, begin to look speculatively at the fish-loop once more.

For the moment we proceed at a dignified four knots in a nor'-westerly direction and hope for the best. Whether the best turns up or not, we shall continue to move at a brisk walking-pace up and down this stretch of sea or another, hauling and shooting every one-and-a-half to three hours, for the next week or ten days, come calm or blow, daylight or dark. This is the true glamour of trawling.

Hauling-time

AT 10.15 precisely by the bridge clock the Skipper presses the buzzer for the winch. It sounds down in the engine-room where the Second Engineer, a pleasant-faced, melancholy young man who never speaks, turns on the compressed air which starts the diesel. It fires at once, and very quickly settles down to its unvarying beat. The buzzer sounds in the mess-room aft, where it is a signal to Lofty and Jack Caine and big Jim (known as "Smoky Stove" by reason of his inextinguishable pipe) and the decky-learner to douse their fags and roll up their sea-boots, wind their tartan chokers twice round their throats and knot them, and collect frocks and gloves and caps (balaclavas when it is cold, sou'westers when it is wet) from the oilskin locker in the companionway or the drying-room inside the funnel-casing. It sounds in the accommodation on the deck below, where the remainder of the watch are lying in their bunks reading, or playing dominoes or crib over the berth-table, and where the watch below are asleep.

In a few minutes they are all on deck. The winch-men have evened up the warps (the trawl would not tow square unless there were as much extra fore-warp out as the distance between the fore and after gallows), and Jack is standing by the towing-block, ready at the Skipper's shout of "Eh-oh!" to whip out the pin and open the block. Released, the warps, as taut as steel bars, twang out of the block and hiss apart through the water. At once the winch starts to heave in the many fathoms of dripping wire.

The ship has already begun to lose way, with her starboard side to the weather; and as the trawl is brought up, so it is brought abeam where it can be handled. Within five minutes of starting to haul, the doors come roaring up to the gallows; the winch stops while they are unshackled from the warps and made fast

by the stopper-chains to the gallows-head. Clear fore and aft, the winch starts turning again to bring in the cables. Now the Dan Leno, no longer rusty but polished from two hours of rolling along the bottom, comes chock-a-block to the gallows' sheave. From the bracket-shaped butterfly just below it, the quarter-rope is unclipped and handed aft. The heavy work with the winch is done. The trawl is alongside, the bobbins grating against the hull as we roll. To bring it within reach, however, it is necessary to get the gilson on to the bobbins and heave enough of them over the rail to keep the foot-rope inboard; and they come slam-banging over the rail to hang, half inboard and half out, while half-a-dozen men reach out over the side and start to drag the square of the net in with net-hooks. This is the hardest labour of all, with the wind in your face and the sea boiling up at you as the ship rolls and the waves curling over and breaking round your head and shoulders, and the mass of sodden net to be broken out of the grip of the sea and dragged inboard by main force. But at last it is possible to get a strop under the belly of the trawl and haul away on the gilson and bring it in, ten and twelve feet of it at a time, until the cod-end itself is close alongside.

The cod-end has made its appearance twenty yards away some time ago. Inexorably, the fish have been driven down the narrowing trap of the trawl by the force of water while we were towing until they could be driven no further, and now, when we haul, they fill the cod-end to bursting. The net-bag is distended with their compressed and writhing bodies; heads and scarlet gills protrude through the meshes; it is one compressed mass of fish, with enough life and air in it to come springing to the surface in a rising gust of bubbles long before the remainder of the trawl is inboard.

This is the moment the Skipper up in the wing of the bridge, his eye moving restlessly over the team of men below him, alert to bawl out a man slow on the after-door or anticipate the ambushed moment of carelessness or danger, awaits with impatience.

A well-filled cod-end, a good bag of fish, breaks surface briskly and bobs half out of the water with the long cod-end knot—the monkey on the top—erect; while a poor bag drifts up half-heartedly and swashes about like a waterlogged boat, gunwales under. A disgusted "Tchah! Twenty baskets!" dismisses that; while a moderate haul gets a non-committal: "Sixty baskets. Could be worse!" This turns out to be one of those, deserving nothing more approving than a neutral: "H'm. Shaky double bag." It could be worse. It could, it always could, be better.

Now, with the cod-end close aboard, comes the last stage of all, to get the fish out of the sea and on to the deck. To achieve this, a wire strop must be passed round the trawl just above the bulging bag of fish and hooked to the purchase of the for'ard tackle. When this is put on to the end-barrels of the winch and hauled on, the bag is gradually eased for'ard along the rail until it is alongside, but still outboard of, the pounds. A straight, gentle haul now, and it scrapes over the rail and hangs swaying above the pounds. The Mate dives under it and in a deluge of salt-water loosens the knot; and, as the bag is lowered, snatches it undone. Immediately, as he jumps clear, the tight-packed mass of fish bursts downwards and pours into the pounds.

The cod-end, although made these days of heavy nylon yarns and immensely strong, can only be trusted with a certain quantity of fish. If there is more than this quantity in the trawl, the cod-end, once emptied, is sent over to be filled a second, a third or even a fourth time. This first haul of ours is a "shaky two bags": too much to risk bringing aboard in one; not enough to provide a really satisfactory second one. All the same, it is a good enough haul to justify the Skipper's hunch, based on rumour and the presence of other ships, of shooting here, on Kildin Bank, instead of pressing on to the east.

One cannot blame him for wanting to get started. The task of catching at least 2000 kit—280,000 lbs.—of fish seems prodigious with nothing in the fish-room except ice. It is rather like the

moment when one sits down with a freshly-filled fountain pen and a clean sheet of paper to start a new book. Sixty or seventy thousand words seems, at that moment, an awful lot of words. At this moment, 2000 kit of fish seems an awful lot of fish.

There is the start of it, on the deck, still with the shine of the sea on the green backs and the white bellies, and the last of life being expended in a gasp of the jaws, a paroxysmal lash of the tail. I do not greatly enjoy watching things die. The deckies have a favourite trick to amuse pleasers with. When they are gutting, they rip out the heart and set it on one of the bollards, a small, suffused, purplish morsel, which goes on beating, though it has no blood to pump and no arteries to feed. Is all that divides us from the dark contained in that scrap of muscle vibrating in the white sunlight? Watching it, I feel something incalculably precious slipping past my comprehension. One might have a cleaner licence to kill if one had the power or the knowledge to re-light what one extinguishes. And so, in a sense, I suppose, one has. And who has tears to weep for a dying cod? They expire with their great mouths open, and a dazed, reproachful look in their round eyes. The catfish snaps its rat-trap jaws and clamps its ugly teeth on to anything within reach, its neighbour, or a pound-board, or a man's hand. It dies angrily, without resignation.

Among this lot there is, besides cod and haddocks, something nobody wants to see—duffs. These are lumps of greyish stuff, the colour of putty and the size of footballs. Nobody seems to know quite what they are, except that they are an abomination. Perhaps they are a type of fungus. Certainly they are immensely heavy, and rolling about in the cod-end during a tow, they chafe the fish and knock holes in the net. Once on board, they have to be sorted out and slung back into the sea; otherwise they putrefy and stink. Yet they have no apparent organs; no valves or fronds or roots; they are simply lumps of greyish matter which crumbles like dry putty. Even their distribution is odd. For a few hauls we may be cursed with the things; and then, in a slightly different

depth of water, or on a slightly different tow, there will be none. And good riddance.

"A bare eighty baskets," says Laurie, surveying the pounds from the bridge as the trawl is bundled back over the side, cod-end, floats, bobbins and all, and the winch begins to turn and the ship to gather way. "A bare eighty baskets."

Note "basket". The English genius for recondite weights and measures is rampant when it comes to calculating a catch. Laurie, running his eye over the cod-end, or over the pounds, estimates the haul in terms of baskets. The Mate, stowing it in the fish-room half-an-hour later, estimates it in kits. A kit, of course, is ten stone; a basket—a theoretical basket, naturally; the only thing that ever goes into a basket is the livers, and they are calculated in terms of gallons of oil or pounds, shillings and pence!—a basket is smaller than a kit in the ratio of five baskets to three kits. Weights are never mentioned, and I cannot tell you to this day what an average-sized cod weighs. In any case, this is by no means the end of it. Down in the fish-room, a different system altogether operates. The fish-room is divided horizontally by a staging, vertically by partitions. The separate boxes, six or eight feet square and anything from six to sixteen feet deep, are known as pounds. These have their own designations, "underfoots" (beneath the staging), "after bulk pounds", "shelf pounds" and so forth, and it is from these, as they gradually fill up, that George will calculate—with uncanny accuracy—our accumulating voyage.

At this stage, however, there is nothing to calculate. Eighty baskets—or 48 kit—tumbled into the aftermost bulk pound will hardly cover the bottom of it. At any stage, the whole subject is surrounded by taboos and governed by the strictest etiquette. The Mate knows, of course, how much fish we have caught: it is his job to know. He will eventually have to provide the figures to be radioed back to the gaffers when we are on our way home. But he would not dream of telling the Skipper unless he were asked; and then his answer is likely to be vague and cautiously conser-

vative. The Skipper, of course, knows too, though he may have kept no record of it; but he will observe an almost superstitious silence on the subject. For anyone, but especially for an engineer, to attempt to introduce it as a subject of conversation, say over the dinner-table, would be a solecism almost as gross as to ask the Skipper when he thought we should be going home. No: the only permissible comment is on the purely local topic of the last haul, if it happened to be a good one. A bad haul is best not mentioned. To discuss airily, or in any terms but the most aggrieved, a series of bad hauls is to invite a breach of the peace.

At this point—we have shot away again and are towing steadily to the WNW—there is nothing to be said. Below us is the empty vault of the fish-room; ahead of us stretch unnumbered days and nights—how many, only a reliable astrologer could say.

FIFTEEN

Hazards of the Island Season

THE second haul of the day was what George described succinctly as: "A heap of shit". More explicitly, it consisted of small, soft codlings, a very few haddocks, and a sprinkling of duffs. The Skipper was disgusted. "Shall we go east and look for some flats?" he asked after we had shot away again in the gathering twilight; but the question was rhetorical; and after a few seconds he answered it himself. "You can't leave fish to go and look for fish." He looked scornfully down at the pounds, where Johnny Large and one of the deckie-learners were heaving the duffs over the rail. "There's a living here; it's not much, but it's a living. There's *Marbella* got eighty baskets last haul. *Lammermuir* got two bags. There's fish about—though," he added bitterly, "I'm damned if we're catching it!"

Fishing is a game of chance. You pick the red or the black, an



Empty cod-end and full pounds

outsider or the favourite, and back your choice while the luck runs or until it breaks. You trust your luck or your judgment and go east after high stakes; or you play safe, stay put and make a living. Or not, of course. Your trawler skipper is a bit of a gambler; he has to be; and, like a gambler, he hides his hand. There's *Arctic Invader*, for instance. He's by-passed our little group, here on Kildin Bank, and gone east to Cape Cherni. Why? And *Cape Warwick*—he's gone east as well. If he has gone to Cape Karin and beyond for plaice, and finds them, while we sit tight on Kildin catching codlings, there will be questions in the house when we get home.

"Here, Sparks!" and Sparks puts *Mid-Week Reveille* down among the Marconi signal-pads and drifts up on to the bridge, looking harassed. It's a hell of a life, being an operator. "Get on to *Cape Warwick* and try and find out what he's up to."

"Right-ho, Skipper."

"Not," said the Skipper, "that I shall necessarily believe what he tells me. For instance, he may tell me he's getting a heap of fish to try and attract me there when in fact he's getting nothing at all. Or he may tell me he's getting naught in order to try and keep me away."

I was already beginning to understand the ruthless professional rivalry that is only very rarely relaxed between the skippers of different ships; but I suppose I must have blinked at this cynical exposition of bluff and double-bluff, for he looked at me and chuckled. "You think we're a miserable lot of bastards, I expect?"

"You've got to live," I said.

"Ay. That's right," he said as if I had thereby settled some inner misgivings on the point. "If you want to see real throat-cutting, you want to go on the dock. Now the wholesalers are going into the retailing side, what chance has the little bloke got? He's got to buy his fish from them, and he's got to pay that much extra for it. The big people can undercut him every time." The Skipper is speaking with the book, for there was a

time when he had a wet-fish shop and was on the dock every morning at 6.0 a.m. to go teetering along the rims of the kits in the wake of the auctioneer and have his labels liberally strewn on the fish he had bought, until he was squeezed out of his most profitable contracts by the new race of owner-wholesalers, and decided that, by contrast, the anxieties of a skipper were preferable to the anxieties of a tradesman.

It was his second break for freedom from the life-sentence of the sea. The first, not long before the war, also lasted a year, and took him to a pub in a country village in the West Riding. They are the classic refuges for the retired or fugitive skipper: the fish-shop and the pub. In them he discovers his lifelong image of the landsman's ease translated into the landsman's tedious realities; the sirens' song soon grows monotonous and shrill at such close quarters, the long afternoon changes drizzling into dusk, and customers are worse than codlings. It is the great disillusionment, from which he thankfully makes his way back to a gaol grown disturbingly to look like home.

"They always come back," say the crew, speaking of skippers in general. "At sea, they're the boss. It's 'Bring us a pot of tea!' 'Do this!' 'Do that!' When they stay ashore for a bit, they find they're not the boss anymore. They to try treat the wife and kids like a bunch of deckie-learners and get left the washing-up to do! No wonder they come back to sea; for a bit of peace and quiet!" Nobody sees a man's weaknesses more clearly or more enlarged than the men who serve under him; and if they do not see them they soon invent them. But this is only a personal way of saying that a sailor's life, to be endurable, demands a degree of adaptation that takes some living down. Even a marriage which can be conducted only during one week-end in four is not quite like other marriages with more continuity about them, and builds up its own conditions and limitations. It may be better or it may be worse than those that are shaped, or warped, by continuous contact: it must be different.

There is also, of course, the matter of money. A trawler skipper is an expert and gets paid at an expert's rate; but there are no cod to be caught in the West Riding and not every skipper is an expert publican. In any case, the rates are lower. I suspect the womenfolk have a say here. Not only have they got to put up with having the old man around all day, but they've got to put up with a cut in the housekeeping and the same old decorations that have been mouldering in the lounge there since last spring. Off you go to sea again, old man!

A groan from the winch has the Skipper at the bridge window, his hand on the buzzer, as twelve fathoms are dragged out against the grip of the brakes. They always fill the air with a sense of emergency, these periodic stresses on the gear. It may be merely one of the doors riding over a mudflat—"or a dirty big rock knocking a hole in the cod-end," says Laurie with a sour little laugh, as if to prevent the worst by explicitly stating it. We shall not know until we haul, and we shall not haul any earlier simply to satisfy our curiosity.

The winch is started and the warps are evened up once more, and one tries to picture just what is happening two hundred yards below and astern of us; the two warps, diverging from the towing block and bending in two shallow arcs through the opaque and greenish light towards the darkness and the motionless ooze of the sea-bed; the doors, riding like vanes along the bottom on their steel runners and, by the manner of their rigging, tugging outwards, keeping the mouth of the trawl open, and stirring up the mud as they go. Far behind them, ploughing through the disturbed and cloudy water, come the great steel bobbins like the many wheels of some strange, wide, disembodied vehicle, and the shark's mouth of the trawl itself, held open by the buoyant floats, and voracious for fish. The fish, alarmed by these untoward currents and commotions, skitter hither and thither. Shoals swim clear; others, corralled within the two sources of disturbance, dart into the net or are overtaken by its inexorable progress.

These White Sea grounds are pretty clean, and a ship can tow for hours on the same course without once getting fast. Loss of gear, even splits, are comparatively rare. The Icelandic grounds are another matter. Klondyke, Ironfoundry and one or two of the others which we were working in the summer are comparatively small patches of sand ringed with foul ground, and the Skipper hardly left the bridge; intent upon his private system of marks ashore—the ever-changing patterns of mountain, cape and fjord—and the bearing of the dan-buoy we had dropped to mark the middle of the ground, he took the ship in a fixed and carefully-calculated circle knowing that the smallest misjudgement would be paid for by groans from the winch and a ripped trawl.

Skippers evolve a preference for a particular type of fishing and are known by the grounds they prefer. There are Bear Island skippers and White Sea skippers and Iceland skippers: Laurie, like his father before him, is at heart an Iceland skipper; and it is they who have suffered most by the Icelanders' extension of their limit-line. The Vestmann Islands, in particular, which lie off the south coast and are now enclosed by the new limits, were a favourite hunting-ground of his—to the annoyance of the local line fishermen who regarded the grounds as their own preserve and were not beyond trying to keep trawlers away by a kind of guerilla warfare.

"The 'liners' were the only snag," he says as the winch engine dies into silence and the momentary interruption is over. "Blokes in little boats with lines and seine-nets; in the spring of the year—that was the season for the Islands—they were as thick as blue-bottles on a cowpat. And they hated us. Thought we pinched all their fish. They'd do anything to muck us about. If you put a buoy down, they'd take it if they had the chance; and if they couldn't get the whole thing they'd snaffle the light and the pellets and leave you towing round in the dark looking for it. Another favourite trick of theirs was to set their lines dead across your bows just as you were shooting; then, if you ran their gear

down, they'd demand compensation—especially if there was one of their own gunboats about to give them a bit of moral support. Then there'd be no end of shouting and yarking, and the next thing you knew, the gunboat sent a boarding party over to inspect your trawl for hooks and lines and sinkers. There was no end to the tricks they got up to. I remember once . . ." he paused and chuckled. "Then, at the end of the season, they used to ditch all their old gear. Anything they didn't want—torn nets, rotten lines, rusty hooks—they just used to dump them over the side. We were always picking it up; and on one particular occasion, at the beginning of the summer, we happened to run into a whole nest of this rubbish. Every haul, for two or three days, we'd be dragging up bits of gear they'd discarded. It didn't do any harm, but it was a nuisance, clearing it; and then it cluttered up the deck as there didn't seem to be any point in slinging it back and more than likely getting foul of it again later on. So it lay about the deck; and if there was anything the blokes fancied—a bit of line for a lanyard or a washing-line for his missis when he got home—he'd help himself and take into the cabin or the berth and tiddly it up and put a lot of fancy knots in it; you know what sailors are like.

"Well, we'd been towing for a couple of hours or more on this particular afternoon when up comes a Scrub gunboat. I didn't think much about it, to be honest. Not at first. We were near the limit-line, but we were comfortably outside; we hadn't had any trouble with liners for a day or two, except for the rubbish they'd left behind them. So I didn't take a lot of notice. And then, by God, I suddenly remembered!

"The previous evening, this gunboat, for reasons best known to himself, had dropped a dan-buoy—just like the one we've got lashed to the shrouds—without a light on it, of course. I suppose he knew the habits of his fellow-countrymen too well to leave a light on it! Well, during the dark hours, we'd towed this dan down with our gear. He'd dumped it slap in the middle of our

tow; and then it came on dark and I completely forgot about it; and when we hauled, up it came. Well, when I saw it, with its mooring wire foul of our fore door, I thought: Oh well, bad luck. You shouldn't have left it without a light on it; but it'll just come in handy for us. Thanks very much. So we puts a line round it and hoists it aboard and slings it on the hatch out of the way. And that's just where it is when the gunboat starts to come alongside.

"I suddenly saw it there and remembered; and I'm just puzzling out how best to bluff my way out of it when I see that this gunboat has one of these liners along with him. So there we were, with the gun-boat's dan-buoy lying on the hatch and the deck littered with bits of fishing-tackle! I'll tell you, I thought for a minute of pulling in the ends and running for it. I mean, you feel such a fool, trying to explain silly things like that, don't you? Particularly when it's perfectly true.

"Next minute, the gunboat comes up on his loud-hailer. 'Skipper,' he says—you know the way they talk—'Skipper, dis fisherman accuses you of running down his lines.'

"'Rubbish,' I shouted back, wondering all the time how long it's going to be before he spots his dan on my hatch. 'I never rode anyone's gear down,' I said.

"'I wish to inspect your trawl,' he says then.

"'You can inspect it when I haul, if you like.' " The Skipper laughed, relishing the moment. "As it happened, it was just on hauling-time; so I sent for the Mate and told him we were going to tow three hours, and he had just thirty minutes to get rid of the dan and every bit of gear, on deck or anywhere else. In thirty minutes' time, if this bloke decided to come aboard and inspect, he wasn't to come across a single bit of gear that wasn't ours. So the Mate grins at me—he was a bloke by the name of Taff Norton, and he had a big foolish grin like a slice of melon—and away he goes. In the meantime, the gunboat is tooling along about half a cable away on our port beam, with the skipper peering at us through a pair of binoculars.

"Well, old Taff gets every bloke he can lay his hands on, and he lines them up along the port side of the hatch with their backs to the rail. Then they whip the dan off the hatch and set about it with saws and axes and start to chop it up; and as fast as they chop it up, there's Taff shooting the bits down the stokehold ventilator to the fireman who's busy stuffing them into the furnace as quick as he can go! In fifteen minutes there wasn't a trace of it. Everything that would burn was down the stokehold, and everything else—the mooring wire and the grapnel—were stowed away in the hold where nobody'd ever find them. Then they started on the other rubbish. They cleared up every old rope's end and sinker and cork float and bent fishhook they could find and burnt whatever would burn and chucked the rest over the starboard side.

"By the time they'd done that, it was hauling-time, and I reckoned I'd done all I could. The only thing that could finish us was if the trawl came up, like it had come up every other haul for the past two or three days, with a lot more gear wrapped round it. And I reckoned I ought to be able to talk my way out of that.

"So we hauled. And the gunboat comes close alongside my quarter, and I can see him peering through his glasses as the doors come up to the galluses, but there's nothing foul there. Then the cables come inboard, and the Dan Leno, and they're clear too. And then the cod-end pops up—a decent bag, seventy or eighty baskets—and the best part of it is, it's as clean as a whistle! There's not a single bit of gear foul the whole length and breadth of the trawl.

"I could almost see the look of disappointment on the gunboat skipper's face; and I thought to myself: If you only knew, me lad! So I gave him three toots on the hooter and came full astern and frightened the daylight out of him; and he and the liner buzzed off and left us in peace.

"I'll bet he often wondered what happened to that dan of his, all the same."

Jim the Bosun came on to the bridge with three pots of tea, and the

Skipper gave him a course and a depth of water, and we went down into the berth, and the Skipper settled himself on the seat-locker.

"This is a rest-cure, compared with Iceland," he said. "Yet I used to like the Islands. It's what you're used to, I suppose. They're just nice little grounds, and you get your bulk cod and your few hundred kit of haddocks and a few shelfers, and your bit of prime. While here it's just plain swag."

The Vestmann Islands are like the ruins of some vast Druidic circle of stones, rising abruptly out of the sea; or they might be all that is left of a big volcanic crater after the sea broke through and engulfed it. Ten miles away to the north'ard, the Icelandic coast-line blocks in the horizon. The unearthly white arc of the great plateau from Mt Hekla, the volcano, to Vatna Jokull sweeps up and is lost in cloud, its moraines and glaciers flowing down to the sea's edge or ending abruptly in bluffs of black rock that are pitted with arches and chasms and splintered into pinnacles and needles. Farther east, the slopes run out a mile or more inshore, and there there is a low-lying strip of flat land, dotted with isolated white farms, an occasional lighthouse and cabins for the succour of ship-wrecked mariners. A good many ships, making their landfall at night or in dirty weather, have failed to see that flat foreshore through its bloom of spray and run hard ashore, to be broken up by the first gale from the southern quadrant.

Of the islands, only Heimaeye with its steep-to cliffs and great sheets of shale, and its boat-clustered little haven, is inhabited at all. All round it the cliffs dive into deep water; sizable ships anchor a stone's throw from shore; and, during the summer, with our gear stowed, Laurie, in a mood to revisit old haunts, took us at full speed between the mainland and the off-lying rocks; so close that we could see the suck of the waves in the sea-caves and the sheep nonchalantly pasturing on the very lip of ledges that fell sheer two hundred feet into the sea.

"Before the Scrubs pushed out their limit-line and took in the Islands, I used to go there every year; there was an Island season,



Ice on the whaleback



One of Marr's ships towing in scuffly weather

in the spring of the year, from about April to June. And talking of towing dans down, did I ever tell you about having my appendix out in the Islands?"

Laurie drank down his tea and grimaced. "Horrible stuff!" If you make tea at almost lethal strength, pour it after an appropriate period for stewing into a thick pint pot and add equal quantities of condensed milk and sugar, you will have a brew resembling trawler tea; but it wouldn't taste the same, and I rather doubt if you could swallow it. At sea, for some reason, it is quite possible to drink seven or eight pints a day, and even quite enjoy it.

"Ay," said Laurie, "it was in the *St Romanus*, the same ship as I had that bit of trouble with the dan, as a matter of fact; and the same mate with me; Taff Norton. I'll never forget it. We'd almost completed the trip. Only another hundred and fifty kit, say another twenty-four hours' work, and we were off home. It was tea-time. I was on the bridge. It was a bit tricky, and I didn't want to go down to the cabin for my tea—we used to eat aft in those ships—so I asked the old cook to bring me up a pot of stew. Which he did. It was all right, too. Very nice. Only about half-an-hour later I brought the whole lot back up again. And then the pain started—by God, I've never known anything like it. I was doubled up.

"I called Taff up on to the bridge and told him to haul while I went below and laid on my bunk. The pain kept on coming; so when we'd hauled, I said to Taff: I think we'd better put into Heimaeye and have a word with the doctor. Well, the wind was right on the land and we couldn't get into the harbour, and Taff didn't know his way in to the 'back door', as we call it, round the other side of the island, so I had to take the ship in myself. I was on my hands and knees; the pain wouldn't let me straighten myself up; and every now and then I just bobbed my head up to peer over the bridge-rail, and down again; and by the time the doctor gets aboard I reckon I'm pretty nigh dying. If you've never had it, you don't know what it's like.

CAPE OF STORMS

"Well, they lowered me over the side in a Neil Robertson stretcher. The pain had gone off a bit by this time, and I remember I was worried to death I was going to slide out of the stretcher into the drink. They got me into a boat all right; and the last thing I saw as we pushed off was the old cook's face. The poor old fellow was nearly in tears; he reckoned he must have poisoned me with his stew, I suppose.

"It was appendicitis all right. They whipped it out that same night; and nearly killed me into the bargain, but that's another story. I tried to get back on board; didn't fancy being left to rot in Heimaeye much; but the doctor said: 'If you go back to your ship like that, you will not live for four hours.' So I sent for Taff and told him to take the ship, contact my old man who I knew had just started fishing on Middle Ground—Ironfoundry as we call it—do as my old man told him and put in another twenty-four hours' work, and then push off home. So off he goes, looking as pleased as a dog with two ticks. He was a nice lad, old Taff.

"Well, he finds his way to Ironfoundry all right and joins up with my old man who's got a buoy down. There was plenty of fish about; but, as you know, it's small and tricky to work, and if you get adrift you find yourself on real bad ground, full of rocks and pot-holes that pull your trawl to pieces. Taff knew this; and he was dead scared. The result was that he was so busy trying to keep on clean ground and not get himself split he misjudged his distance from the old man's buoy, and he goes and tows it down.

"Of course he's full of apologies; and to make it right with my old man, he puts down a buoy himself.

"For a couple of hauls, all goes well, and there's Taff and my old man revolving sedately round the buoy, catching fish. Then it comes on dark, or it starts to blow up a bit or Taff gets fast—something, I forget just what—and Taff comes swerving away from the rough ground and tows his blessed buoy down as well."

"As far as my old man's concerned, that's his lot. He calls him up on the RT and says: 'I thought you'd come here to catch fish,

not ride down every dan-buoy in creation. The best thing you can do is pack up and go home!

"So poor old Taff pulls his ends in and pushes off home with his tail between his legs. It didn't matter too much because, as it happened, we'd had fifteen or sixteen hundred kit in before my appendix played me up, and so he landed a fair trip.

"The funny part was, though, when I got home a month later, it so happened that the first person I bumped into as I'm going down Hesse Road is Taff's missis. She was one of those fine big, strapping lasses, the kind that's always gaffer of the terrace; and she was dead proud of her Taff. She comes sailing over to me, and she's so full of inquiries about my health I can tell there's something on her mind; and sure enough, before I can even answer her kind inquiries or tell her how they nearly killed me off with peritonitis and one thing and another, she's thanking me for giving Taff his chance and telling me what a wonderful trip he'd landed and how he'd made over five thousand and what a marvellous skipper her Taff was—as much as to say he'd got me out of a nasty spot and if I hadn't had that spot of trouble with my appendix and had to hand the ship over to him I'd have been in the workhouse!

"Well! I didn't say anything, because I was fond of old Taff and I didn't want to put him wrong with his missis; but it wasn't how I should have described that twenty-four hours he spent with my old man on Ironfoundry!"

There was a knock on the cabin door, and Jim put his head round the curtain. "Hauling-time, Skipper."

"Thank you. Press the buzzer, then, will you?"

"Ay, ay, Skipper."

The Skipper stretched and hopped off the seat-locker and into his slippers.

"Ay; well. Here we go again!"

"Knocked Down"

It was 4.0 o'clock in the afternoon, and nearly dark. Perhaps because one had learnt to associate darkness at sea with the blacked-out ships of wartime, fishing at night had always sounded both difficult and hazardous. Most people have the idea, I think, that fishing stops at dusk, and that for eight or ten or twelve hours the ship lays and everybody gets their head down; whereas, in fact, only breakdown, damage to gear, or stress of weather are sufficient cause to stop fishing; and fishing at night is no different to fishing by daylight.

Instead of the gloom one had imagined—a few glims, perhaps, like the clandestine lighting of a carrier's flight-deck—the decks are brilliantly lit by three big floodlights on the bridge, and by numerous other lights, on the mast, on the casing, on the head of the derricks and on the whaleback. Concentration is centred on the deck and the pounds and the rail, so that they resemble a stage-set at the opening of an expressionist play, fiercely lit and desolate and empty, awaiting the ritual slaughter of the dying before a cyclorama of leaping seas that flicker in and out of the light's reach like white flames and occasionally send a puff of spray, like smoke, drifting over the cowed and motionless figures as they take their appointed places.

Then, as the doors come up to the gallows and the figures move into action, the Skipper switches on the searchlight on the bridge-top and tilts it down on to the water a hundred feet from the ship's side. Its granular beam pierces the surface, transforming that pool of sea into a bath of pale green, translucent water, changing the spread trawl into a vast green sea-anemone and the cod-end, at the edge of light, into a Roman candle soaring slowly upwards and fizzing with green fire.

"Not bad," says Laurie non-committally, and flicks off the

searchlight. A few minutes later, when one bag and then a second has cascaded into the pounds, clean fish all of it, with no duffs, he repeats it with a trace of approbation. He is satisfied; or rather, since no skipper is ever satisfied, not too bitterly disappointed.

Within half an hour the trawl is over the side again, and we are chugging quietly over a dark and easy sea; while in the pounds the watch dexterously split the fish from gills to anus, flick the two lobes of liver into baskets, wrench out the intestines, and send the evacuated corpses spinning into the washer. This is no more than a large, shallow, iron octagonal bath, erected on stilts and runners above the fish-room hatches, and filled and continually replenished with clean sea-water from a frayed hose. At either end there is a kind of sluice-gate. At the moment, the after one is partially lowered, and the fish, washed by the movement of the water as we roll, eventually tip out, over the sluice and down a weir of iron rungs through the opened hatch and so directly into the fish-room below. The washer is a comparatively recent invention. Before that, the fish were slung across the deck into the pounds on the port side where, with sea-water swilling round them, they were kicked and scuffed around until the blood was off them. They then had to be handled again to get them into the fish-room.

The second dark haul also brought in two bags; but as the second one came over the rail the ship rolled sharply and the bag swung clear of the wire preventer—rigged especially to check it—and punctured itself on a corner of the washer. Nothing was lost but ten minutes, spent mending the hole in the cod-end; but the Skipper was not pleased. He was even less pleased when the Bosun, who was in charge on deck, misjudged his “Leggo!” and dropped the cod-end foul of the head-line. It had to be retrieved, hauled up again, and sent over the side clear—another ten minutes lost. The Skipper permitted himself some acid comments; but none of them reached the Bosun himself, skipping round with worried concentration under the floodlights. They hardly needed to. The floods divide the bridge from the deck as abso-

lutely as the footlights divide actors from their audience; but Jim did not have to see the Skipper's scowling face or hear his voice to know that they were there, hidden behind the glare, and to know that every move, every mistake, was observed and noted and not to be forgotten.

Too many mistakes might mean the sack at the end of the trip. In this respect, the powers of a Skipper are arbitrary and absolute. In all others they are hedged about by the limitations of the Merchant Shipping Acts and almost comically small. The standard fine for such reprehensible behaviour as sleeping on watch, drunkenness or striking another man, is five shillings; for when he signs the Ship's Articles before joining, every man, including the Skipper, agrees to conduct himself "in an orderly, faithful, honest and sober manner", and bobbing off while on watch or filling another bloke in can be described as neither orderly nor faithful, and deserve the full rigour of the law. In cases where the full rigour of a five bob fine proves inadequate, or for more serious offences still, there are always the courts, to which a man may be haled when the ship docks. But in a good sea-ship with a popular skipper, the power of the sack—otherwise known as the pedlar's pack or the last card—is usually enough.

Popularity in this context does not necessarily imply a hearty good fellow who is always aft playing crib. It may mean the positive but limited virtue of making money, since from a Skipper's capacity to make money everybody benefits; or it may mean the negative virtue of simply not messing the chaps about. All sailors tend to be superstitious, and none more so than fishermen; and some skippers will put their crews to endless labour in trying to find a formula, an incantation, which will charm fish into their trawl. Ringelly used to grow perfectly eloquent on the lengths to which one skipper he sailed with went in this direction. If fishing were slack, he would be forever re-rigging the trawl, changing the bobbins about, lengthening or shortening the headline or the quarter-ropes, swapping the doors over, or—worst job

“KNOCKED DOWN”

of all—rigging the entire gear on the opposite side of the ship and towing port instead of starboard.

Every skipper has his idiosyncrasies, his tricks of experience, and likes his gear rigged in a certain manner, not least Laurie himself; and when, during the summer, the previous bosun took it upon himself to shorten the head-line, the old man was on him like a ton of duffs. Similarly, if a man is slow on the doors, or the team along the rail are not as slippy as they might be dragging the square inboard, they may be sure the bridge window will slam down and a roar above the roar of the wind and sea will assail their ears. Nobody minds that; or if they do, their mutter of disgust will go unheard and be soon forgotten. But to be dragged out, or kept on deck, to chop and change the gear and lose that precious ten minutes below with a fag and a pot of tea, is another matter.

There may, of course, be good reason for it; and later on in the trip, after a run of slack fishing, we did change the fore-door over because the Skipper thought, and George agreed with him, that the bracket, which had recently been renewed ashore, was out of true: and the fishing picked up. More often Laurie blames himself. The gear, as far as can be ascertained, is towing as usual: therefore he must be towing too deep, or too shoal, and he alters the next tow accordingly. Meanwhile, the hands are left comparatively unmolested to get on with the routine—unending and arduous enough by itself—of shooting and hauling, gutting and stowing, and mending when mending is necessary.

Not only their comfort but their lives are in the Skipper's hands, and one facet of popularity may be the refusal to take unnecessary risks. There is a moment during a rising gale when it is still possible to haul and shoot again, but not to haul again three hours later without putting the men who have to work along the weather rail to the danger of injury from the bobbins as they are hove aboard, or of being carried over the side by a sea. A good skipper knows when to stop and lay; and, if the weather worsens, as it may during the bad gales of winter, and

laying or dodging—heaving-to in sailor's, but not in fishermen's, parlance—are too risky, when to run for shelter. There are skippers who, in order to save a steam away from the grounds, or by error of judgement or over-confidence, or in the hope of stealing a march over their more prudent rivals, put off running for shelter until the last moment. On occasions—the loss of *Lorella* and *Roderigo* off the north of Iceland during the winter of 1954 was a recent case—the last moment is too late.

"It's different when you're young," Laurie remarks, relaxing again now that we are on course, in ninety fathoms, with no ships ahead: "You are over-confident, because you're inexperienced and you're keen and you don't know what fear is. You don't give a damn. But when you've been at it as long as I have, you're a bit more cautious. For one thing, you've learnt that it's not worth going looking for trouble; it will come to you without you having to bother looking for it; and for another thing, you know you'll get your voyage somehow, without having to break your neck. It may take you a day or two longer—and that's what you can't stand when you're starting. You're all out to get on, and every hour counts." He laughed. "I'll never forget my first trip skipper. I had the old *Sprayflower*; one of the Yorkshire Steam Fishing Company's; Johnny McCann* was the gaffer. August 31st, 1932, it was we landed. We had nine hundred and fifty kit in and made nine hundred quid: that wasn't bad for those days, and I knew it. I was as pleased as punch. I went swaggering up to old Johnny's office with a big, foolish smile all over my face, and he looked at me and he said, 'There's one thing, Oliver. You told me you were coming for Thursday's market.' 'Ay, I did,' I said. 'For your information, today is Friday!' I'd lost a day without realizing it. But I'd made my voyage, so it didn't matter.

"Then my luck changed, and I made a whole row of rotten trips. Johnny let it go so long; then he sent for me and told me

* The late Johnny McCann, He died, while this book was in proof, at the age of 87.

“‘KNOCKED DOWN’”

he'd give me one more chance. If I didn't make some money this trip, I'd be out.

“Ay. Well, it was winter, and off we went to Iceland, and halfway we ran into a gale. It came away from the sou'west, a real snorter, with a very heavy sea running, and the old *Spray-flower* was wallowing along with both her rails under and green water breaking on the bridge windows; it was all the man at the wheel could do to hold a course, for the seas were throwing her head off. The Mate was on the bridge with me, and I could tell he was getting worried; but all I was thinking about was getting to Iceland and catching a heap of fish to keep old Johnny McCann quiet. Well, after a bit, the Mate says: ‘Don't you think we ought to bring her round and dodge till it eases?’ We were eased right down as it was; and I said: ‘She'll be all right,’ and we kept on. It didn't seem to be getting any worse; so after a bit I left the Mate to it—that'll show you how green I was—and went down to the berth to get a bit of rest. I settled myself on the seat-locker and picked up an Edgar Wallace story and I'd hardly read a line when I felt the whole ship hesitate. It was just as if she was hanging in space, and I said to myself: Now we're for it, and started for the ladder that led up to the bridge.

“But before I ever got there, this huge sea hit us, and we were over on our beam-ends, and there was water pouring into the bridge and down into the berth.

“I picked myself up and staggered up on to the bridge. It was a shambles. The whole of the bridge-top had gone, and wave after wave was sweeping clean over us and she was lying right over and I swear I thought she'd never recover. Then I looked for'ard, and saw flames! Ay. The force of the sea had ripped the fo'c'sle stove from its moorings and it had landed in somebody's bunk and set it alight.

“It was touch and go whether we got her round head to sea before another wave like that hit her and sent her straight to the bottom; but there was still pressure in the boilers, luckily, for the

engine-room skylights had been stove in and there was a foot of water in the stokehold, and little by little she came round. Even then, when we'd got her laid and the fire out in the fo'c's'le, our troubles weren't over; for the coal in the bunkers had shifted as she rolled the first time and she was listing badly and the seas were punishing her all the time."

Laurie chuckled grimly, and I tried to picture *Brucella* with her bridge-top gone and the icy sea-water pouring in in a seething white wall on top of us, and the wind screaming through the shrouds and the great waves pounding her as she lurched and wallowed broadside on, no longer a living thing but a water-logged hulk. It was an ugly thought.

Laurie checked the course and the depth and casually gave the wheel a turn and continued: "The first thing then was to try and get her back on an even keel; so I sent for the trimmers and told them to get below to the bunkers and shift the coal. They refused. 'If I go down there,' said one of them, 'and the ship turns over, I'll be lost.' 'If you don't go down there, the ship will turn over,' I told him, 'and we'll all be lost.' They didn't like it; but, with a bit of persuasion, they went.

"It took us two days to get the ship seaworthy, and then she wasn't anything to look at. Still. We went on to Iceland and had two or three days' decent weather and got a fair trip in. Enough to prevent old Johnny McCann giving me the sack, anyway."

"You mean," I said, "you went fishing, in that state?"

"Oh ay," said Laurie. "Of course. Hell, I couldn't have faced the boss without I'd caught some fish—not after the previous few trips. That would have been my lot."

I nodded sagely. I suppose I had imagined, in my innocence, that if you happened to have your bridge-top carried away and your engine-room skylights stove in, and a fire, and a couple of feet of water sloshing about here and there, in a full gale in the black heart of winter in the North Atlantic, you either turned round and limped home or laid a course for Reykjavik or

"KNOCKED DOWN"

the Faroes. I could see now that that wouldn't have done at all.

"All I'm trying to say," Laurie went on, "is that I never should have got myself into that position, to be knocked down by a sea like that. We should have been dodging. Ah; you learn."

We were silent, stirred by the memory of old struggles fought and won. There was no hint in the manner of the telling that any other decision had been possible than to go on; and little hint of how deeply the experience had struck. You learn all right; and you learn best the hard way; but then old fears come marshalling to mock at caution and call it cowardice. The struggle is never won outright, once and for all; and there are more skippers than will ever admit it who fight their nerves from the beginning to the end of every voyage, and have to prove their own prowess to themselves each time afresh. But only to themselves; the world takes it proven. And I remembered a story told me once by Admiral Sir Denis Boyd of how, when he was Captain of *Illustrious* and the ship had been wrecked by German bombers and was on fire from stem to stern, her flight-deck pierced by thousand-pounders and hangar and 'tween-decks filled with the dead and dying, he had stepped out into the wing of the bridge to survey the damage; and for a moment he was so unnerved that he could not control the chattering of his teeth and had had to put his pipe in his mouth and bite hard on the stem. Later, visiting the wounded in hospital, one of the men had said to him: "We reckoned we were done for. Then we see you come out on to the wing of the bridge, with your old pipe stuck between your teeth, just as if nothing had happened, and we knew it would be all right after all."

"Quarter of an hour to hauling-time," the Skipper says, peering at the clock and returning to his watch at the bridge-windows, which are already bleared and crusted with salt and seagull droppings. The sea is quiet, and the ship tows steadily. Here and there around us, the lights of other trawlers glitter across the water; and a thin snow drives across the deck and on to the men

who are clearing the last of the previous haul. Our lights reach out beyond the ship's side to the nearby waves, which ride suddenly out of the darkness and slap at the bulwarks and fall on the men working; and touch the gulls that swerve tirelessly up and down on a level with our eyes.

The Skipper sees the gulls and the lights of other ships, the men working and the dramatic alternations of light and dark, not in isolation, as I do, as an unfamiliar and fascinating composition, but merely as one well-known piece in the whole pattern of the trip. They are resolved into the direction of wind and sea, into a calculation of time expended and fish caught; and about an indecipherable blob of light a couple of miles away, he remarks:

"There's *Marbella* hauling. Sparks! Try and find out what she's got, will you?" He gives the wheel a poke with his fist. "Shall we go east and look for plaice, eh? What's *Cape Warwick* up to?"

The questions are rhetorical and I say nothing. I think by now we both know that we shall not go east this trip; but the time for finally admitting it has not yet arrived.

"We'll see what this haul looks like, shall we?" he says, and reaches up to press the buzzer for the winch.

SEVENTEEN

Rules and Symbols

OVER the RT, one skipper is chatting to a friend. "Our wives and children," he complains, "are no more than symbols to us. My wife put in a link-call to me while we were running off; sounded proper miserable. 'Go down town then,' I said, 'and buy yourself a new coat and hat.' 'I don't want a new coat and hat,' she says. 'Well,' I said, 'go and buy yourself some nice flowers then.' 'I don't want any flowers,' she said. 'What do you want then?' 'You turn that ship round and come home,' she said. 'That's all I want.'"

RULES AND SYMBOLS

To the skipper, isolated from the rest of the crew, alone on the bridge or in his berth with his worries and responsibilities, the RT is a solace and a safety-valve. Within a hundred miles, or a hundred yards, will be someone on whom he can discharge his exasperation at a slack haul, his wrath at a split belly, his impatience with his owners or his longing for home, or with whom he can simply pass the long, uneventful hours in conversation. Since all such exchanges are strictly public, they tend to conform to an accepted standard, forceful and derisive. Only occasionally does the guard slip and the accumulated weariness break through.

Somebody's split; somebody else got fifty baskets last haul. It's blowing up on Skolpen Bank and there's no fish, and someone is getting two bags every haul on North Deeps, and Ernie or Bill or Harry landed Friday with 1800 kit and made five thousand. Somebody recently got married, and his pal calls him up and asks: "Well, Tommy, 'ow are you? And 'ow's that little 'ummock?" and the wireless room rocks with gales of crackling laughter. And a melancholy voice describes how, last trip, he brought his wife to sea with him, which is allowed in Grimsby but not in Hull, and he is from Hull. "She was poorly," he says. "I couldn't stay at home. So I thought the best thing was to bring her with me." And all might have been well if he had not injudiciously sacked three of his crew at the end of the trip, for they promptly got their own back by going to the Insurance Company, which is run by the owners and makes the rules, and reporting him. They had waited until he was at sea again—without his wife, this time—and he has just learnt what has happened over the air. When he has his voyage safely aboard, he will be going back to face the displeasure of his owners, and, possibly, a court of inquiry.

"What will happen to him?" I asked Laurie, who is at the door of the wireless room, listening.

"He'll get six months' suspension, I expect."

"It seems a bit hard."

"Ay," says Laurie, moving back on to the bridge as Sparks

starts to take down a message in morse and fades out the talk. "He should have known he'd not get away with it. You never do at this game. If you don't sack anybody, there's still someone who'll get tight in the clubs when he goes ashore and open his big mouth, and the runner or somebody overhears it, and back it goes to the office. There's not much they don't know.

"It's the same with liquor. You're allowed a couple of bottles, but you're not supposed to drink it. It only needs one of the blokes to come into the berth a couple of times and see me with a glass in my hand and the next thing it's: the old man's on the booze! It gets round. Then something happens: you run ashore, or you put in two or three bad trips or you lose a man overboard. You were stone cold sober; but nobody's going to believe that. The old man was on the booze!"

As a skipper sacks his crew, so the owners sack their skippers if they fail to catch fish. For less heinous offences there may be courts of inquiry and suspensions; but a successful skipper will find his way back. Successful skippers are too precious to throw away.

Laurie himself was suspended for three months, many years ago. George had come yawning up on to the bridge to take over the watch, and Laurie had handed over to him and was ensconced on the seat-locker with his feet up and a rug over his knees and a glass of the "forbidden" Haig to hand on the massive circular table with its maroon baize cloth. It was pleasant at such a time to relax and remember the past, the good times and the bad.

"Ay," he said after a minute, "I was suspended—for failing to repair a lifeboat. That's what the court of inquiry said, anyway. It was in a ship called the *Monimia*, before the war. She was one of Hendricksen's, and I had my brother-in-law Drury mate with me. There's a lucky bloke. D'you know he's been over the side twice? Ay—and he's still alive. The first time, he was Mate of the *Balthazar*, and he was on the deck when a big sea came aboard, picked him up and swept him clean overboard. Before he hardly

knew what had happened, another wave picked him up and chucked him back on board again. The second time, he was Skipper of the *Tesla*. He's a bit of a clever bloke is Drury, likes to do everything himself. Well, the radio packed up; trouble with the aerial. Instead of sending the operator up to fix it, Drury decides to do the job himself. The next thing, he loses his footing and he's over the side again! They picked him up—that's the wonder of it—and took him into Iceland and he was flown home.

"He was mate with me, at all events, on this particular trip. It was one of those trips when things go wrong from the very beginning. We were sailing on an afternoon tide, I remember, and all the crew were in the clubs, boozing; and when sailing-time came round, none of them had turned up. So the Mate and I and the Bosun took the ship out of the dock ourselves and anchored in the stream to wait for 'em. So we waited; and after a time the Boss's son comes out in a motor-boat with crew for ourselves and the *Rilston*, who was in the same state. What a shower! And so drunk they had to be hoist aboard like so many sacks of potatoes! I had first pick; and I said to the Boss's son: 'How would you like to put to sea with this lot?' He was a skipper himself, so he knew what I meant; but crews were hard to get at that time; and so away we went to Iceland.

"It was January, and the weather was lousy, and what with one thing and another we ran short of coal; so I put into Heimaey and sent a wire to the Boss asking him whether I should run up to Reykjavik for coal or risk it and come on home. We had enough if the weather behaved itself, but nothing in hand. And he wires back: come on home. So off we go, straight into a full sou'-westerly gale. It blew! We were staggering along at three to four knots and not even making good our course, for we had to haul her head up every time an especially big sea came tearing along at us or we'd have been overwhelmed. That's what we mean when we talk about dodging; and damned uncomfortable it is, too. No one gets any rest, particularly up for'ard, with the bow smashing

into the seas and water pouring in through the ventilation and every plate and rivet groaning. And you're on the bridge, and it's as dark as the inside of a cow's belly, and you daren't relax for a second. All the time you're trying to gauge the weight of the sea that's coming at you, fighting to save the ship. I'd been on the bridge for twenty-seven hours without a break when, about 5.0 in the morning, it began to ease a little bit; so I handed over to Drury and popped down to the berth for an hour's rest. I couldn't sleep. I propped myself up on the seat-locker, and I was half-reading a story in *The Wide World* and half-listening all the time, wondering how the ship was behaving, and I felt her pause and shudder—exactly the way the old *Sprayflower* had done when she was knocked down. There's a deathly silence, and you wait for it with your stomach floating up on the bulkhead somewhere and your heart in your mouth. I yelled to Drury: 'Get her up into wind!' and then the sea hit us and you could feel the ship staggering under the weight of water, and I was into my boots and up on the bridge shouting 'Ring her on Full!'

" 'I have done,' Drury says, 'but she won't answer.' The next moment, the whistle of the engine-room voice-pipe blows; it's the Chief to say he can't get any revs; and Drury looks at me and says:

" 'It's that trawl.'

"When the weather had worsened, we'd moved the spare trawl from the rail in case it got carried away, and had lashed it aftside on the boat-deck. When this heavy sea hit us, it must have parted the lashings at the same time as it smashed the port lifeboat; and the trawl went over the side and fouled the propeller. As a result, the engines were locked solid; and there we were, being pounded by colossal seas, and without even enough power to keep the ship's head up.

"Well; we got the trawl-door—otterboards, some people call 'em—rigged weatherside as a sea-anchor, which helped to keep her head to sea; and then I went down to the engine-room. The Chief was scared of his pressures and wouldn't do anything—by

RULES AND SYMBOLS

God, he was a lot more scared of them by the time I'd finished. We built them up and built them up, rocking her ahead, astern, ahead, astern, to try and get the propeller turning and throw off the gear that was jamming it. For a long time, nothing happened; then, at last, we got it to move quarter of a turn one way, and a quarter of a turn back, and we slowly increased it until, after three hours, we had the propeller turning just fast enough to keep the ship's head up.

"In the meantime, the operator had got an SOS off, and Freddie White in the *Fort Royal*, who was 120 miles nearer home, turned round and put his ship before the gale and came alongside. It was blowing too hard to pass a line across, so he streamed a light rope, made fast to a string of floats, down our lee side, and we drifted on to it and picked it up. We hauled that in, and his two warps and linked it up with our warps, with fifteen fathoms of anchor cable in between to keep the tow-line in the water, and he towed us the 200 miles to the Faroes.

"And, do you know, when the diver went down to clear the propeller, he found there was only one miserable, half-chewed bit of rope still left jamming it. The movement of the water, and the belting we'd given it, had just about cleared it. So we took on coal and went home, and all the fish was rotten! We made £300. And I got three months' suspension. What a trip!"

"They should have been pleased they didn't lose the ship," I said.

"The gaffers are never pleased if you don't make money. But that wasn't what I was suspended for. I was suspended for failing to repair the lifeboat. Well!" Laurie managed to inject a wealth of incredulity and scorn into the single word. "What did they expect me to do? Down tools and start mending boats, with the ship foundering under us? I ask you!"

There is a knock and Sparks puts his head round the curtain.

"Message from the office, Skipper."

"About the *Lord Alexander* and her 750 kit of flats, I suppose? What does it say? Go and do thou likewise?"

"That's right, Skipper," says Sparks, armed with his bad-news grin. "She made over ten thousand."

Laurie groans. "As if we didn't know. Well, it's too late now. Why didn't I keep my big mouth shut?"

EIGHTEEN

Fish, Metaphysics and a Parted Fore-cable

THE dark hauls—the conventional phrase, totally inappropriate in midsummer, and almost indiscriminately appropriate now, still carries its meaning—yielded a fair bag each. Then at 7.0 George comes in and shakes the Skipper.

"We've just hauled, Skipper. The fore-cable's parted." Laurie grunts: "One-ended job, eh?" and rolls out. To me he adds, as his feet fumble for his slippers: "This is what we don't like. Especially in bad weather."

The cable is the wire that connects the doors and the Dan Leno, so the starboard side of the trawl itself is adrift. The Mate hauls in the after-cable until the Dan Leno is chock-a-block at the after gallows. This brings one corner of the trawl alongside; after a bit of manoeuvring, he succeeds in throwing a hook over the head-line and gradually drawing it up on the gilson until the other Dan Leno and butterfly are inboard. Once that is done, the quarter-rope is in reach, and the trawl, with its bag of fish intact, is hauled aboard normally.

The whole proceedings takes the best part of an hour, for the full weight of the trawl is taken by the single after-cable, and if that should part, it would mean the loss of the entire gear. With care, this disaster is avoided, and at the end of it there are eighty baskets of fish flopping about in the pounds. While Jim, looking in his knitted helmet like a knight out of the Bayeux tapestry in undress, sets about rigging a new cable, and the deckie-learner

begins half-heartedly to gut the fish, the Chief comes up on to the bridge in his green fez and announces that another of his cylinder head joints has started leaking. It happens to be a suitable moment; so while we are laid, beam to sea, the two jobs are dealt with simultaneously. There is a moderate swell running, and this has us rolling checerfully.

It is a cloudy morning, with half the sky occluded by soft-winged snow-showers and, in one bright, cloud-framed corner of the horizon, Kildin Island, nearly twenty miles away, shining briefly in the sun, until the showers move across and blot it out. Owing to the presence of the island, which is a kind of Arctic Spithead, the limit along this stretch of coast is twelve miles.

By 11.0 we are hauling again: three bags. This satisfactory haul, forecast by heavy markings on the fish-loop during the tow, serves to confirm Laurie's decision to stay put for as long as we are catching fish, and he is quietly pleased with himself and the situation—until the message from the office returns to trouble any complacency. We shall not make ten thousand: that is quite certain. But given reasonable luck, we should make an average five or six. That will not stop the gaffer asking awkward questions.

The standard fisherman's charts give a rough indication, not only of the state of the bottom, with full soundings, but also of the fish to be caught on the various grounds. Cod and haddocks—for some reason cod are always singular, haddocks always plural—abound here, out to the north-east on Skolpen Bank and along the coast of Teriberski; but one has to look hard to find plaice grounds; and many of them are now within territorial waters. And even on such grounds as there are, they are not usually plentiful. Only immediately after the war, when the grounds had lain virtually unfished for five years, was it known for a ship to dock with an entire voyage, more than 2000 kit, of them. Now they have to be found and caught, and 500 kit is a good proportion for any voyage. Out here, in 100 fathoms, only a rare one finds

its way into the trawl among the swaddies, jenny annivers (small skates), little soles, lump-fish and oddments; and from the trawl into the galley, for Ted has the pick of the fish dragged aft for our tea and breakfast, and very good it is too. I have particularly succulent memories of the little dabs we used to pick up on Klondyke; but they are not found in these waters.

A recurrent controversy, on which we have long and inconclusive discussions, is whether, with improved trawling methods and larger and more powerful ships, these grounds will eventually be fished out. George says he reckons that the fish being caught are definitely getting smaller; that they are not having time, in fact, to grow to their full size. But the cod's rate of reproduction is so colossal, and the most efficient trawl such a relatively inefficient instrument for catching them, that Laurie believes that there will always be plenty of fish to be caught. On the other hand, it is only within the past twenty-five years that trawling on a large scale has ceased to be profitable in the North Sea, and it is now left to smaller craft, drifting for herrings in the autumn and seining for limited quantities of prime fish such as turbot and sole. Years of heavy fishing there have had their effect: may it not have its effect on the distant and far larger grounds in time?

That the danger exists and is recognized is demonstrated by the existence of a body known as the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, one of whose functions is to organize and correlate all available information on the numbers, breeding habits, migrations and so forth of demersal fish, and recommend by international convention any steps that will mitigate the tireless ransacking of the seas. The fixed minimum mesh-sizes, subscribed to but not observed by all the main trawling nations, were devised by the Council and recently revised; and Iceland has never ceased to maintain—somewhat speciously, say we—that her main reason for increasing her territorial limits is in the interests of fish-conservation.

But if there is, in fact, a likelihood of the sea being fished out, there is, equally, small precedent for hoping that the disaster will be averted. Dustbowls, soil erosion, the wholesale destruction of forests, all stand witness to man's feckless rapacity when offered the chance of reaping where he has not had to sow. To this day, in the West Indies, the peasant trudges up into the virgin forest, clears a patch of ground, works it until the soil is exhausted and then goes elsewhere and repeats the process; and with every rainfall, the sea is stained with irreplaceable top-soil scoured from the mountains.

The argument, like most arguments these days, ends up on the highly-charged subject of progress.

"There's no such thing," says George dogmatically. "There's motion, maybe; purposeless activity—like that dirty big wave out there—but no advance. Why, man's just the same now as he was when he was wandering round dressed in skins. How's he progressed? Tell me. I'd like to know."

Arguing with George is like playing a game of squash by oneself. Wherever you hit the ball, it always comes to a hard, blank wall and bounces back; and also you always end up with your back to one of them. I abominate scientists and deplore nine-tenths of the conjuring-tricks they get up to; but the ball has to be returned. Take medicine; take the new drugs; take the child-mortality figures. . . .

"Oh, I know," says George. "Does it make him any happier? That's the point."

Of course it doesn't. "But you can't deny there's physical progress. Not so many people, for instance, live in sheer squalor and ill-health as there did, even fifty years ago."

"So what?" says George, deflecting the ball out of the corner. "Is it progress to be scared stiff of being blown up by a bloody big bomb instead of being scared stiff of dying of dysentery or pox or bubonic plague? If that's progress, you can have it as far as I'm concerned."

CAPE OF STORMS

And he turns away with an abrupt hunch of his shoulders to stare out at a sea and sky on which, so far at any rate, man has succeeded in making no mark more permanent than a condensation trail or a ship's wake.

Next year we shall have the dubious pleasure of knowing that there is an earth-satellite the size of a baseball, or is it a football?—orbiting our sky that was once neutral and beautiful, reflecting only the changing weathers of the earth. The year after, who knows, it will have grown to the size of a prize pumpkin or a double-decker bus and be freighted with a thermo-nuclear charge or plague bacilli. Progress. Then what prevents one sharing George's withering nihilism? We know perfectly well that the priests of this new cult are both dedicated and false; yet we build them temples and pay them handsome salaries and give our young men and our virgins to them for initiation into their rites and mysteries. They leave our hearts untouched; they promise our destruction; they offer us no security—the thing we long for most, for we are the vagrants of the universe—they rob us of that vague remembrance of the past, in which our sense of continuity lies, by changing our world too fast, and leave us like a drowning sailor with his hand on the gunwale of an empty boat; yet we give them *carte blanche*. Is it pride, or sheer tenacity for living, then, that gives us hope, despite? Or simply that, in our short journey from the dark into the dark, we learn by degrees to take our questions "to the shrine that has not ceased from speaking, the heart within, that tells the truth and tells it twice as plain"?

Fish and metaphysics make uneasy bedfellows, and the argument dies out like the Arctic sun, leaving an ember in the mind. Such speculations do not impinge directly on our more local anxieties and hopes. They do not, for instance, assuage Jack Caine's thirst for Guinness or Tich's for rum, or Ted's anxiety about his missis or the Skipper's anxiety about the flats we should be catching beyond Cape Cherni. They do not warm fingers numbed by cold sea-water, nor still the longing for a woman that

lodges like a void of loneliness and desire in the pit of a man's stomach, nor do they stop the Chief's cylinder-head gaskets leaking.

Out here—and it is the measure of our helplessness, like the strike that never took place—one is quite prepared to leave such abstractions to others. Whatever shape this new world takes, we shall all have been too busy about our own affairs to have had any hand in its creating.

NINETEEN

And a Stranded Warp

THIS morning, now that fishing is under way, the Skipper and George brought the duty-free liquor up from the bond-store for issue. It amounts to the not very liberal quantity of half-a-bottle of rum per man, and a bottle for the Chief, the Bosun, the Mate and the Operator, and appears on their bond-bill at duty-free prices. It is dealt out, amid much acclamation, in the cabin (or mess-deck) aft; and will either be drunk within twenty-four hours, or, in the case of one or two prudent souls, eked out, tot by tot, over the coming week. From the imprudent there will be some resigned lamentation later on when, after a prolonged session on deck in the cutting night air, a tot would go down the right way, but all have already gone.

Hauls continued moderate all day, with no whacking big bags to vary the monotony or dangle specious promises of a quick trip: a steady living. Then, at 5.0 o'clock, when I was in the galley sipping a pot of tea and watching Tich skipping about in front of his range, shifting the massive iron pots about within the gleaming steel frame on top or peering critically at the things in the oven, big Jim came in, his large red face indignant, his pipe emitting even denser clouds of smoke than usual.

CAPE OF STORMS

"Flaming fore-warp's stranded," he mutters laconically, swallowing the dregs of his tea and tying a neat reef-knot in his choker with enormous, nimble fingers. Jim is the expert on every matter that can be included under the term of "rigging": a stranded warp means a three-hour job of work for him.

The warps are the two great lengths of wire on which the gear is lowered to the bottom. They are the single most expensive item of a trawler's equipment, of very heavy calibre, and carry an almost incomputable strain during towing, as can be judged by the humming tautness of them as they run over the sheaves of the gallows and the length of the deck to the towing-block. Until I got used to them, I sometimes used to wonder what would happen if one parted, for the latent power in that bar of steel, vibrating on a level with one's waist, must be prodigious. I remembered reading—was it in one of Halliday Sutherland's books?—of a man being scalped by a parted wire-rope; and one of Lofty's most diverting yarns included a description of how, in one ship he was in, they had a one-ended job and were busy flaking down the wire along the deck when something carried away and the coils of heavy warp took charge and went out on the run. Lofty himself, one gathered, jumped the only way he could, which was over the side, and hung there, his small eyes level with the rail and blinking as each lethal turn whipped off the deck and, at last, cracking like a stockwhip, sizzled through the air and out through the gallows-sheave.

On this occasion, only one strand of the warp had gone and the trawl came up without mishap; but, weakened even by the loss of one strand, it was no longer safe to use; and once the trawl was aboard the warp had to be run off the winch to the point—in the twelfth length—where it had stranded, and then cut and spliced. Nor was that all. It is vitally important that both warps should be level during towing, and this is done by matching the marks which are tucked into the strands every twenty-five fathoms. To cut and splice one warp means losing several fathoms; and so, to

even the other up, one of three things has to be done: either the spliced warp must be remarked throughout its length—which is impracticable—or the other warp must be cut and spliced to match; or a complete length must be cut out of the damaged warp. This, though the most wasteful, is the quickest and easiest method; and this the Skipper decided to do.

“Another job,” he said when I got back to the bridge. “I told you, didn’t I? Those warps aren’t flexible enough; they can’t take that tight turn round the bollards. It cracks them.”

Even done the quickest way, it was still a three-hour job, with Jim and the Mate, and Lofty and the Bosun, working on the splice in pairs. Once the wire has been cut, by hammer and chisel, and the strands unlayed, the two ends are mated and lashed. The two parts of the wire are then made fast—one to the whaleback ladder, the other to the guard-rail on one of the bollards; an iron bar is forced through the strands; and while one man straddles the wire and holds it firm with the bar, the other prises open the lay with a spike like a butcher’s steel and forces the separate strands through.

Under the theatrical glare of the lights, it is like some recondite, symbolic sacrifice, with Lofty, gigantic and still, gripping the tommy-bar with his thick, mauled fists, and Jim the Bosun, nimble and twisting, as he wrenches with bleeding fingers at the wire. And it is quite in character for Jim to be working like a dervish, skipping hither and thither and looking at every moment as if he will run himself through on his own spike, while Lofty stands quite still and encourages him with jeers and exhortations. An absolutely bullet-proof shamelessness is one of Lofty’s more provoking characteristics.

Hours later, after we had shot away again, and he and I were yarning over the wheel, he described how he had come to lose the middle finger of his left hand (“Lucky it weren’t ma raight ’and, ’Ughie!”). They had packed up fishing because of heavy weather, and Lofty was working up for’ard under the whaleback, securing the gear. The ship was laid, and seas were creaming over the rail

and filling the deck with green water; and to get from the whale-back to the casing there was nothing for it but to pick your moment and take a chance.

"Ah were joost on ma way aft to get a pot of tea when a bloody big sea cooms banging over t'rail—a proper big bustard. Caught me good and proper. Well, Ah joomped to grab'old of the first thing Ah could get me 'ands on, to save meself, lake, and it were the end of the winch. And this sea hits me fair and square, and Ah'm still 'anging on to the winch—and half bloody well drowned as well—when the ship rolls back to starboard and the wire-guide—the bloody big iron thing that slides backwards and forwards across the front of the winch—this bustard cooms chasing across and fetches oop on ma 'and. Foony part of it was, 'Ughie, Ah felt nothing. As soon as Ah saw me chance, Ah nipped aft to the galley; and when I looked at ma gloove and saw it were squashed flat, Ah were quite surprised. Well, Ah went oop to the bridge to show it to the old man, then; and when Ah pulled me glove off, there was me finger, stripped to the bone. There weren't a bit of flesh left on it. But Ah still didn't feel aught. But, by God, a bit later on, when Ah'd turned into me bunk, I felt it then. It were agony!"

They put him ashore in Honningsvaag and he spent three weeks in hospital there; but the finger healed stiff, and it was finally amputated at the middle joint.

Although nowadays the Wireless Operator is ex-officio doctor (it used to be the cook), the crew naturally bring their ills and injuries to the old man; and I was reminded of a story of Laurie's of a rather similar occasion. They were running off in the *St Romanus* and hit some dirty weather, and Laurie sent the spare hand to secure the after door, which was banging about in the gallows. The ship lurched, he grabbed the gallows to save himself, and the door slammed back and took off his thumb. The Skipper saw the whole thing happen from the bridge-door, and knew that the first place he would make for would be the bridge. "I'm not

too good at the sight of blood," says Laurie; so as this lad came on to the bridge by one door, he goes out by the other, nips down to the galley and says to the cook: "You'll be having a patient down in a minute. George Lodge has just lost his thumb!"

"Funnily enough," Laurie finished the story off, "I came across his thumb on the casing about a week later. Just like a bit of putty with a nail on!"

Lofty has followed the history of his middle finger to its conclusion and moved on to less reputable passages of autobiography when the Skipper comes up on to the bridge, and he breaks off to stare conscientiously out into the night—calm, dark, with stars as brilliant as chips of ice or diamond.

"Eh, Thoddy," says the Skipper. "How's she doing?" As always he glances first at the compass, then at the echometer, and finally out at the sea and the sprinkling of lights of other ships.

Lofty ("Thoddy"—Third Hand) says: "Keeping 85 fathom, Skipper."

"Ay. Well, if tonight's no good, tomorrow we'll go east to Cherni." He went back to the window. "There's Will Edmunds over there. See him?"

It was the old riddle. "You can tell by the arrangement of his lights. He's a three-bridger." Laurie laughed. Will Edmunds was a friend of his; they had been talking on the R.T. earlier in the day, and Edmunds had decided to abandon Skolpen Bank and come and join us. "Yes. That's Will all right. Can't you see his big 'ead!"

TWENTY

The Sea Circumscribes our World

THE next day was Wednesday; our ninth day at sea, our third fishing. The dark hauls had been moderate again: and the dawn haul produced seventy baskets—and another stranded fore-warp!

The Skipper was speechless with disgust; but when, after another three hours spent idly lying beam to sea, we shot away again and hauled to get one miserable bag, a mere thirty baskets, instead of hitting the bridge-top, he merely took off his fishing-cap and scratched his bald pate and murmured: "Now, why's that? Plenty of fish-markings. I don't understand it."

And all the blue and sparkling day it was the same—the barest living. A change of soundings seemed to make no difference. The fish had gone.

Boredom began to settle on the ship. Each haul, only thinly covering the pounds, was soon gutted and put away, and the men drifted aft to sit round the long table and drink tea and yarn and smoke, or retire to their bunks to read. There is no pleasure to be got out of slack fishing, for every slack haul is bound to prolong the trip; better to be kept at it, hour after hour, the pounds knce-deep and the washer choked and the empty spaces in the fish-room filling up and changing shape with every haul; and with every haul, the moment when the ship's head swings on to a course for home and the engines settle down to the regular heart-beat of cruising revs draws closer.

George would come up on the bridge after we had shot and stand, a long, efficient figure in thigh-boots, fearnoughts and speckled jersey, his black hair tousled and his sharp blue eyes neutrally bright in their red lids, saying nothing, looking out at the everlasting sea and sky. He seemed never tired nor flustered, nor particularly communicative. Sometimes we would argue fitfully about flying or the Germans or war or God, only to be waylaid by the blind angles of his mind, the rigid conviction of his uncertainties.

At midnight he comes on watch after his six hours below, and takes the ship for a couple of hauls while the old man gets some sleep. Since every mate hopes to, and a fair proportion do, become skippers, this is a sound arrangement, but not an invariable one. Laurie, when he went Mate with his father, was never

allowed to haul or shoot the gear, and when he at last went skipper on his own account, had never done either. Talking about it one night before he turned in, he said: "I remember there was another ship going the same way as me—the *Lord Inchcape*—and so I sheared off by myself. I was damned if I was going to let him see me making a fool of myself. So I went SW of The Corner, as we call it—it's SSW of Staalbiere Head—and stopped the engines. Well, I says to myself, here we go! So I sang out: 'Pay away!' and the blokes started to shovel the bloody gear over the side, and I put the helm over and rang her on; and after a bit somebody hollers: 'All square aft!'—and there we were; but I was damned if I knew how!"

When you watch it done faultlessly, over and over again, shooting looks the easiest thing in the world; yet it rests upon a nicety of judgement and calculation; and it is by no means uncommon to make an error in one or other and "paralyse" the gear. This may mean a mere matter of hours spent subsequently "unparalysing" it, or such a desperate bunch of bastards that nothing is left but to hack it free and lose a trawl.

By two o'clock in the afternoon these days, the light has gone; but two hours later, when it is black-dark, there is still a trace of lemon yellow over the land to the south-west. Daylight or dark, the gulls never leave us, clamouring round the cod-end as it surfaces and pecking at the exposed gills, scavenging at the scupperports during gutting; and, at night, passing and repassing through the sea-jade beam of the bridge searchlight, trembling on the wind. Their cranked wings and questing heads make patterns which are repeated endlessly against the blackness and soothe the mind with a natural rhythm, like falling water or a line of breakers, continually changing into something indistinguishably the same.

Fishermen have a name for everything, and never talk of gulls. The white ones with a black edging to their wings, the slim ones that are always riding the wind, they call kitties; the grey, dove-

like ones with rounder bodies and less predatory beaks, which are content to sit comfortably on the water and go sculling after their food instead of pouncing on it from the air, they call mollies; and the little fat puffins that have such trouble getting airborne after a meal are known as willocks.

"We were anchored at the Islands one time," Laurie remarked, as we stood watching the savage clamour of birds round the cod-end, "you know, at the back door there, George," and George nodded. "The wind blows in terrific gusts down off the cliffs; and one day, a whole heap of these little willocks came tearing down towards the ship, when a great gust of wind caught them, and they got swept straight down the engine-room ventilator!" We both laughed, a little suspiciously, perhaps, and Laurie went on: "It's the honest truth. The old chief was bobbing off down in the engine-room, and woke up to find the whole place full of birds. Gave him quite a turn. The lads were hours rounding them up."

The Skipper is full of charming, slightly bizarre recollections of this kind; and of recollections, less charming, of the tough and often dangerous side of deep-sea trawling. Anything will set him off; and sometimes on the bridge, cracking a joke with Loftly or Leslie or the Bosun, he will start a yarn, break off to slam down one of the heavy, plate-glass windows (they work on a leather strap, like those of an old-fashioned railway-carriage) and roar at the men on deck, pick up the thread again, interrupt himself to give a helm-order and continue unperturbed: and the lines of Flecker's about Odysseus always spring into my mind:

"That talkative bald-headed seaman came. . . .
And with great lies about his wooden horse
Set the crew laughing and forgot his course."

One of them—and it was no lie: that, and the fact that Laurie would never forget his course, disqualify the lines—I shall never forget. He was in a ship called the *Bardia*, and they sailed for White Sea one New Year soon after the war, with a gale blowing

in the North Sea, and the blokes all bad with the booze. They were a hundred miles from the Norwegian coast, well round Stadtland, and he was sitting in his berth reading when it suddenly struck him that the locker he was sitting on seemed to be uncommonly hot. He had no sooner made the discovery than there was a knock at the door. It was the Second Engineer; and he had come to report that the coal in the thwartships bunker was on fire.

There was a heavy sea running and the ship was taking too much water aboard to risk opening the bunker lids. There was nothing for it but to run for land as fast as they could go, and hope they made it before the fire took hold. Trondheim was the nearest port; but the approaches are tortuous, it was mid-winter and dark, and Laurie had never been in there. So he chose Namsos; and as they drove in towards the coast, with the fire brewing below decks and the temperature in the berth and the chartroom rising all the time, the wireless operator got to work. He succeeded in contacting the agent at Bergen, who directed them to the radio station at Rovik. Rovik ordered out the rescue boat, arranged the rendezvous off Kya Light, alerted the Namsos fire brigade.

By the time they were off Kya and had picked up the rescue boat, the chartroom deck was on fire, the wheelhouse above was full of smoke, and although outside it was a bitter winter's night and they were breaking a thin crust of ice all the way up the approaches to Namsos, all the bridge windows were wide open.

It was a race against the fire all the way, and as they turned the corner and there ahead of them were the lights of the town and a crowd on the quay and the fire-engines lined up waiting for them, the flames were licking through the charred planks and the paintwork was beginning to blister and discolour, and in the wheelhouse it was almost too thick to con the ship.

They went straight alongside, and the firemen swarmed aboard almost before the warps were ashore. While some of them passed a hose through the scuttle and gave Laurie the privilege of drenching his own smouldering berth, bunk and belongings,

others were tackling the bunker lids. As the lids came off, the flames burst out and shot fifty and sixty feet in the air, and it seemed for an instant as if nothing could save them consuming the whole ship before their eyes. But once the firemen had got their hoses ranged, they pumped enough water into her to nearly sink her, and soon the flames and smoke dissolved into a hissing cloud of steam and from a cloud of steam into a wisp of dampish smoke and a stench of wet ashes.

They gave the water thirty-six hours to seep down through the coal and reach the heart of the fire, then pumped her out, set the chartroom and the berth to rights as well as they could, and put to sea again to do a bit of fishing. But they were barely clear of the harbour when some idiot dropped a heap of old gear over the side, and it promptly fouled the propeller! So they were towed into Rovik and lost another thirty-six hours while the divers went down in the freezing water and worked to clear it. By then they had not enough coal left to go to White Sea; and so they went to Andenes, off the Lofoten Islands. It was a little too early in the year for those particular grounds, and they picked up a mixed voyage with a preponderance of coleys; and when they at last turned for home, they had a roaring sou'west gale every inch of the way across. For four days consecutively, they were laid and dodging, barely making headway against the wind and sea; and scraped into Aberdeen, at long length, with empty bunkers. They had been away five weeks; but all the Boss said when Laurie rang him up from Aberdeen was: "I wondered what had happened to you!"

The answer might have been: "Everything."

It's all in the game. You take on wet coal and spontaneous combustion starts and the next thing you know you have fire on your hands; you get a run of gales in the winter months and take a colossal beating; somebody disobeys the most stringent orders and dumps a length of old cable, and it fouls the screw; and you stagger home after three weeks and more away and find ten ships

landing ahead of you and half your fish goes unsold and is sent for a nominal price to the fish-meal factory. And always, over and above the fishing, you are handling a ship at sea; and at sea you can always take one risk too many.

Over and above everything, all round us, the sea; calm, now, with no more than a brightening lilt and lift to its lolloping waves and their bubbling crests; but tomorrow, if the wind comes away from the nor'west and the waves start travelling, another matter. First the marshalling of clouds on the horizon, the glowering light and a long swell; then the wind comes, chancy at first, ruffling the swells; veers for an hour, then comes galloping with a blast of trumpets from its true direction; the seas break, and their crests as they lift and curl are flayed off and streak the sea with foam. The ship shudders as the first big seas buffet her, off guard, and pour away through every port. She recovers, her bows buoyant and lifting, up the long slopes that intercept the horizon; pause, tilt, fall away in a sharp downward arc, then climb again, shaking off the smother of white water. Now the air is thick with rain and spindrift and the wind howls, flapping a loose halyard into teasels, flattening a man against the casing, laying the ship over. And on the bridge, the man at the wheel watches each wave like an enemy, nursing her up to meet it, warding every blow. In an hour the ship is fighting for her life.

The sea, calm now, with the brittle shimmer of frost sparkling above the small, bright waves, circumscribes our world.

TWENTY-ONE

Slack Fishing and Early Days

AT 7.0 that evening, and again at 10.0, the cod-end drifted limply to the surface half-empty. The Skipper took these successive disappointments with equanimity; but after another twelve hours

of it he started to get restless. The charts came out of the drawer under the chart-table, and his private log of previous trips from the drawer under the bunk, and he began to compare dates and positions.

Then, on the midday haul, the fishing suddenly improved and we got 50 baskets of fine, shiny, lively fish, much of it haddocks. We had been towing on a reciprocal course roughly NW-SE; now the Skipper decided to tow back NW again, but instead of turning at half-time, to continue to a point to the north-east of Point Navolok, where, according to his log from *Bayella* of twelve months ago, he had had good hauls. Such a move fitted in with the circumstances of the better haul we had just had, and we went dashing off (at four and a half knots!) to the nor'west in high spirits. During slack fishing like this, one fair bag or simply a change of plan or tempo breaks the monotony and gives us the feeling—however illusory—that we are getting somewhere.

The weather has grown steadily colder, and now the pools of spindrift on the boat-deck are frozen. At one o'clock, or soon after, the day went out like a spent match, leaving only a rose-red spark glowing briefly over the land. A sharp little wind has come out of the night-shadows, chilling the men who are still busy with the last haul down in the pounds. The water, sloshing about in the washer, is tinged with scarlet; and the great gaping cod—is there anything uglier in creation?—with their guts out still wriggle with a grim simulation of life until they are bundled down the weir into the fish-room, where, indeed, they go on twitching strongly for half-an-hour or more.

The Skipper, looking down on the men in their white boots and black or yellow oilskin frocks and sou'westers performing the pagan rite of disembowelling—as if they should consult with a sharp pen-knife the entrails of innumerable cod—gives the wheel a poke with one fist. "I hated that job," he says, "when I was a deckie. Lord, I remember, in the old *Lord Birkenhead*, one trip in the spring of the year to the west coast; ten days we were, catch-

ing nothing but cats and a few cod. And all short hauls, an hour, no more; for those big cats weigh heavy, burst the cod-end if you're not careful. It was all short tows and hard work. We'd just about get the deck clear and have maybe ten minutes, maybe quarter of an hour, before we had to turn out again. There was no fixed watch below in those days; not like they have now. Now they get their six hours below, no matter how heavy the fishing is. On that trip, the longest nap we got in the whole ten days was twenty minutes. Ay. Twenty minutes." He smiled. "We were tough in those days.

"The skipper was a real hard-case; Ernie Kingdom, they called him; and he used to wear a big diamond-ring like a knuckle-duster on the middle finger of his right hand. There was no respite with Ernie Kingdom skipper; and Jack Fearnley and I—he's dead now; we were pals and usually sailed together—we used to sit back to back on the locker in the fo'c'sle; didn't dare to lie down or take our boots off; and when they called the hands, Jackie used to sing out: 'Come on, Laurie!' and out we'd stagger on to the deck again.

"Cats vary a lot in size and quality, far more than cod or haddocks, and sometimes you get a good run, as we call it, or a 'diseased' one—they're thin and meagre after spawning. It was up to the old man to decide what we kept and what we slung over the side; and sometimes he'd sing out: 'Save 'em all'; and sometimes it would be: 'Don't save the small ones', all depending.

"Well, one haul—and we'd been at it a good few days and we were all beginning to get a bit chokker, what with no sleep and no break from hauling and gutting—the old man kept on chopping and changing, save that one, don't save those, and bawling the blokes out, until one of the deckies gets right browned off, and he holds up a cat and yells at the bridge: 'And what would you like done with this one, you pernicky old bastard?'

"This fair got old Ernie Kingdom's goat; and he comes tearing down from the bridge shouting: 'I'll show you what I want done

with it, damn your eyes' and a lot more; and the deckie sings out: 'Come and show us, then!'—and before you can say split, there's old Ernie and this deckie going at it hammer and tongs in among the fish in the pounds.

"I was down the fish-room, as it happened, with the Mate who was a bloke we used to call Stammering Sam; and when I heard all this argy-bargy going on on deck, I wasn't going to miss it and started up the ladder. Stammering Sam was a very nervous kind of a bloke, and I suppose he thought that a fight between the skipper and one of the crew was no sight for a deckie-learner; or maybe he was scared I should get mixed up in it. At any rate, as I started to scramble up the ladder to see what was going on, there was Stammering Sam hanging on to my legs and trying to pull me feet off the rungs of the ladder and shouting at me to k-k-k-keep out o-o-o-f it and n-n-not get m-m-mixed up!

"By the time I managed to get my head through the hatch to see what was going on, the deckie had old Ernie down and his hands on his throat and was throttling the life out of him, and Ernie had his right hand free and was doing his best to gouge the deckie's eye out with his knuckle-duster. It was touch and go whether the old man was throttled before the deckie lost his eye or vice versa; but at last the deckie lost his grip on the old man's throat and Ernie was up like a tiger and blacked his other eye for him, and he went down all among the fish in the pound and the slime and guts and stayed there; and Ernie shook his head once or twice, as if he wanted to make sure it was still attached properly, and stumped off back to the bridge."

Laurie paused, his thoughts, I suppose, with Ernie Kingdom and Stammering Sam, and the young lad of sixteen or seventeen, peering over the coaming of the fish-room hatch, who had once been himself; the lad too dizzy with weariness to lie down or take his boots off; for after a bit he continued: "I wouldn't like to see those horrible conditions back again. I wouldn't. Nowadays the blokes get their six hours below; and eighteen hours mucking

SLACK FISHING AND EARLY DAYS

about with this heap of rubbish is a decent day's work. . . . Do you know, when we were on our way home that trip, I always remember, I was caught for the first watch. Just my luck. The old man was turned in, and Stammering Sam, who was supposed to have charge of the ship, was draped over the engine-room telegraph, snoring; and there was I, out on my feet, slumped over the wheel. I'd bob off, then wake up with a start, peer at the compass, then bob off again: couldn't keep my eyes open.

"At that time of the year, the Icelanders come out in shoals off Old Snowy;* and I'm at the wheel, peering at the compass, peering out ahead, and it was coming in dark, and I suddenly saw, dead ahead of us, hundreds and hundreds of blessed lights. It was like a town; they were dotted all over the ocean; and I hadn't a clue what to do. I was only a kid; I was more than half asleep; I didn't dare wake old Stammering Sam—if I could have woken him, which I doubt—and I certainly didn't dare risk going between them; so I thought: There's only one thing I can do, and that's go right round them!

"So I put the wheel over, went right round the outside of them in a damn great wide circle, and got back on my course." Laurie laughed his rich and throaty laugh. "I never told anybody, and where we fetched I didn't know and didn't bloody well care. All I cared about was being relieved and getting my head down and sleep and sleep and sleep."

The last fish had gone bouncing and twitching down into the fish-room; the hatches were closed; the water in the washer was turned off, and the crimson swill slopped backwards and forwards as the ship rolled. In the white glare, the everlasting gulls flashed past, silver against the black swells. In the pounds, briefly, only a few white ribbons of guts, a red swaddie with his intestines bursting like a bubble in his mouth and his round eyes popping, sloshed to and fro towards the scuppers.

"Ay," said Laurie, glancing at the clock. "Well, they've not

* Snaefells Jokull.

had long below this haul——” and he reached up and pressed the horn for the winch.

In a few moments, the whole interminable process would start again.

TWENTY-TWO

Splits and Strandings

As we hauled, the *Lammermuir* went seething across our bows with her steaming lights burning, bound for home. Only this morning someone had asked her which market she was going for and had received the reply: “Don’t be bloody ridiculous!”—clearly meaning that they were not even considering packing up yet. And here she was, cracking off to the north-west at 12 knots with her gear stowed. Ah, the intuitive deceitfulness of fishermen!

So we hauled, and the trawl came up with a split belly and the fish, half-drowned, floating whitely away from the green pool of light into the darkness beyond.

“Oh, let’s have a Haig!” says Laurie in disgust, and turns off the bridge; while on the deck below the fish are left to flounder in the pounds and the whole watch turns to at once with braiding-needles and balls of twine to mend the rent. They work like men in the heat of battle, as if their lives depended on its instantaneous repair. In an occupation so long-drawn-out and, to all seeming, so leisurely, this desperate urgency appears almost out of place; and yet how many times have I heard Laurie say: “It’s time; it’s all time;” and time spent mending, splicing, repairing engines, any time at all, in fact, in which the gear is not on the bottom, is time lost. We must, if humanly possible, fit eight hauls into every twenty-four hours, and we have already lost two through stranded warps; so the men fall to like pioneers, and in an hour we are back on our beat, SE-NW in 90 fathoms.

“Nobody seems to be catching much,” Laurie remarks as he

SPLITS AND STRANDINGS

peers grumpily down at the "furniture" going over the side, "and that's some consolation, I suppose." Down goes the window with a bang. "Look sharp with that head-line!" and up with a bang. "But this isn't catching fish. This is going through the motions." And the bobbins blunder on to the rail and go grinding over. "Every two hours, all day, every day, shifting that bloody lot! What a life, eh?"

As the warps come off the winch barrels they creak and crackle with a harsh, tearing sound; but the winch itself exerts its tremendous power without a sound. At first everyone was a little in awe of it, as if it might go berserk in its soft-footed, ruthless way and start ripping the gallows out of the deck or towing the ship against the will of the main engines.

In a ship of this tonnage (750) there is no real danger of that, for the ship is big enough and stiff enough to take it, even if the gear should get fast and bring her up all standing; but that it can be a real danger to a smaller ship was shown by the loss of the *Hildena* off Sule Skerry a couple of years ago. *Hildena* was one of five diesel ships of about 300 tons built for J. Marr & Sons, and had been running out of Hull to Iceland, first with Laurie as her skipper, and then for her last three trips with a Fleetwood man, Juggler Clarkson. On this, her last trip, she was towing with her starboard gear down, in the normal way, when the trawl came foul of a rock or something of the sort and became fast. The gear held and hauled the ship over to starboard until she was listing heavily and started to ship water. The after water-tight door on the after deck gave way, and the accommodation filled, and in half-an-hour she turned turtle and sank, taking the Skipper, the Wireless Operator and four of the crew with her. The Mate and the remainder of the crew were picked up by a sister ship, the *Velia*, who heard her SOS, chopped away her own gear and rushed to the spot.

What actually happened is conjectural; but one theory was that after having got fast, the Skipper went astern, hauling in the slack

of his warps as he went, to try and get clear, was carried by the tide over the top of his gear, and before he realized what was happening, hauled himself over on to his beam ends. If this was so, it seemed that the winch, or the main engines, or both, were rather too powerful for the hull that carried them.

Certainly, a designer of trawlers is faced with reconciling the irreconcilable. He must design, first of all, a first-class sea-ship, for she has to work in weather as bad as any in the world; at the same time she must have a low freeboard so that the men can work the gear. She must be fast enough to make a good passage to and from Iceland, Bear Island or White Sea (a round trip of up to 3000 miles); and yet have the necessary towing-power to drag her gear at an unvarying three-and-a-half to four knots through the water. She must be as economical as possible to run, yet large enough to carry three, four or five thousand kit of fish in her fish-room, and fuel and stores for a month at sea. *Brucella*, which is barely two years old, embodies solutions to all these problems; in the result she is a handsome little ship and an extremely efficient machine.

On Thursday night and Friday morning things began to look up once more. George had the ship from midnight, and made two bags with the dawning haul. After checking up round the fish-room and a casual conversation with big Jim, who shares some of the responsibilities of stowing the catch with him, he came up on to the bridge and announced in offhand and circumspect terms that we might be considered to have 1000 kit of fish aboard, more or less. Since we cannot decently land less than twice that amount, and we have been at sea for ten days, the probable pattern of the trip emerges. Today is the halfway mark. During the next five days we shall hope to catch at least another 1000 kit (we shall hope to catch a lot more); and when that has been accomplished we shall set our bows for home. Since the human mind cleaves to landmarks in time, this calculation gives everyone a feeling of satisfaction. Interminability is so far tamed.

Meanwhile, the weather has changed. All yesterday, under clear skies, the wind freshened; today it has moderated and come away off the land, bringing with it driving squalls of snow and cutting visibility down to about a mile. Through this cold and drifting weather this morning, a Panamanian tramp with a deck-cargo of timber—from Archangel or one of the Siberian ports farther east—emerged, thrashing north-west on her way to Honningsvåg and the Leads.

Then, as a sharp antidote to optimism, when we hauled at 10 a.m., the forc-warp came up stranded once again—the third time this trip. The Skipper was beyond words. The cod-end broke surface clear of the ship and he peered furiously at it and muttered: "And three good bags as well." Then, seeing that I too was looking at it, he laughed: "Well, two, anyway!"

Mere splicing would no longer serve. The system of marks was out of hand already, what with one warp remaining its original length while the other had had two odd lengths chopped out of it; so this time the Mate, with the Skipper's approval, decided to change ends: that is, take the whole warp off the winch—all fourteen or fifteen hundred yards of it—flake it out along the deck, then put the end we had been using back on to the winch first. It would still need splicing, of course; but the warp we would now be using would virtually be new, and, unless we went into very deep water, the splice would remain on the winch. What was puzzling to everyone, though, was why it should continue to strand at all, always somewhere in the twelfth length and at a point where it was not subject to any special chafing: it was a mystery we never solved.

In the meantime we laid, as usual, beam to sea, engines stopped, while the crew reeled fathom after fathom of wire off the winch and laid it in long coils up and down the deck. "It all takes time," Laurie remarked as he watched them with unconcealed impatience. "You think you can do a job like this fast, but you can't; and time is the enemy."

By the time we shot away again, time, the enemy, had won nearly two hours off us; but the tow produced a decent bag of clean fish, unsullied by duffs and with a handsome proportion of haddocks, so we were somewhat appeased.

Now, with half the voyage aboard and the bulk-pounds in the fish-room filling up nicely, George reckoned it was time to start shelving. This meant, among other things, that my unremittingly idle days on the bridge—broken only by sallies on to the deck to take photographs—were over; for shelving is the one job on a trawler to which the most landlubberly pleasurer may lend a hand and be welcome.

TWENTY-THREE

Life in the Fish-room

As soon as we have shot away again the fish-room hatches are slid back to give two narrow openings, one aft of the washer for the fish, one for'ard of it for the men. One runs the gauntlet of seas breaking over the rail, of flying cod and haddocks flung gutted at the washer, of the slopping water of the washer itself, heaves oneself over the warp and on to the hatch-cover, and scrambles down through the narrow aperture—one foot groping for the top bracket of the ladder, or any promise of support—down the ten feet to the staging. It is a ship's hold, disguised as a refrigerator, this dank and chilly cave of a place, and it extends from the engine-room to the forepeak, from the deck overhead to the bilges, and the full width of the ship. The staging is no more than a scaffold, a catwalk, running fore and aft the length of the fish-room; the pounds on either side of it are another ten feet deep, and are divided up like stalls in a cattle market by stanchions and heavy boards. Those for'ard are still full of ice up to the level of the catwalk and above; those aft are rapidly filling up with fish;

those amidships are empty, and it is in these bays that we shall gradually build up our shelves, shelf by shelf, with the boards stacked for'ard. The refrigeration pipes overhead are furred with frost, and there is a sickly light from the deckhead bulbs behind their wire cages, and the air is cold and stagnant.

As I swing down through the hatch in borrowed sea-boots and blue rubber gloves, the fish has already started to splash out of the washer and down the chute into the after end of the fish-room, where it lands on the staging with a hollow, squelchy thump. George is aft, slinging the small codlings into the bulk pounds and shovelling a thick powder of ice on top of them; Raymond, the deckie-learner, is desultorily breaking up the congealed mass of crushed ice for'ard with a pick and shovelling it aft to George; and Jim, identifiable only by the top of his woollen helmet and a cloud of blue smoke, is down in one of the pounds with a heap of cod at his feet.

I report to George, who laughs and says in his leery way: "What, come to do some work? OK, my lad, you can start shelving some of them 'addocks. Aft, starboard side."

I collect an armful of boards and slither aft with them, and a couple of the aluminium angle-irons which slot into the stanchions between the pounds and provide rests for the shelf-boards. There is a shelf of haddocks in one of the after bays, and I construct my shelf two or three inches above their shiny blue backs. The shelf made, the next thing is to cover it evenly with a layer of ice. Now for the fish. From the steadily-increasing pile under the washer-chute, one sorts out a couple of dozen decent-sized haddocks and heaves them in the general direction of the shelf. It is at this point that one discovers just how difficult it is to get a good firm grip on a large fish. There is something hopelessly unprofessional about gathering it up in one's arms like a wet baby, as I did at first, and attempting to launch it from one's embrace; but grabbing it casually under the gills—the only natural handle—is a knack that takes a little mastering. Gutting, at which I tried

an inept hand earlier on, is good practice for this: one tends to lose any foolish misgivings about mishandling the anatomy of something which one is busily engaged in disembowelling. And so, still awkwardly, one sends the fish slithering over the broken ice and splintered boards towards the pound; and then the business of shelving really starts.

The shelf is about six feet from front to back; and so the only way to get the first few tucked away at the back of the shelf is to lie face downwards on the bed of ice and wriggle one's way in, pushing the fish in front of one until they can be arranged, belly down, heads outward, tails overlapping in the middle. And, as the shelves climb towards the deckhead, the less room there is and the more awkward it becomes; and I nearly brained myself in the summer by springing on to an upper shelf without noticing an angle iron that happened to be part of the deckhead just above the shelf.

One had certainly never realized how much trouble is expended on the stowing of a voyage; but the owners have learnt that the fish-merchants—and, by inference, the public—will pay extra for the look of a fish; and a fish that has been shelved, with ice under its belly but none on its back, comes to the market looking fresher than one that has been slung, higgledy-piggledy, into a bulk-pound with ice all round it and a certain weight of fish and ice on top of it. And so we shelf, not all the catch by any means, but a good proportion of the best of the last week's fishing and by the time one shelf has been filled, another heap of haddocks has collected at the foot of the hatch; one makes another, covers it with ice, packs it with fish—and so on until all are stowed away.

This is slack fishing, and in less than an hour we are scrambling up the ladder and out on to the wet and slippery deck. One has grown accustomed to the warps, thrumming with the strain on them, now, and simply uses them as a convenient handrail or lifeline—except when we are hauling or shooting. The decks are al-

ways wet; wet from the overflow of the washing-machine, from the water that sluices off the trawl and the warps and the cod-end, and from the sea that comes flushing in through the scupper-ports, fans out over the deck and pours away again aft.

We make our way over the heavy boards of the deck-pounds, past the oil-slippery patch by the winch and the last baskets of livers waiting for the attentions of the Operator, and up the iron ladder to the funnel-casing which, with the big, lagged pipe of the main exhaust going through it, makes a gaseous, but efficient, drying-room. Here we peel off our smocks and frocks and gloves, roll down our boots in the professional, and most comfortable manner, to the kncc, and making our way aft to the break of the boat-deck, climb down the ladder on to the main deck and nip into the door by the galley.

A gust of warmth and noise and light hits one from the open door of the engine-room where, below the network of shiny steel catwalks, the huge, incredibly immaculate main diesels maintain their effortless beat, and a greaser in singlet and sweat-rag watches his drip-feeds or the Chief in his green fez wanders round wiping off invisible smears of oil.

Opposite the door from the deck is Tich's galley, a narrow, tiled place with a big steel range against the for'ard bulkhead, and on the other side a sink and draining-board, and a hatch through to the mess-deck. The range is always burning; and on top of it, kept in place by the steel fiddles, there is always a dixie or two of boiling water. Beyond, just off the stove, is a shelf reserved for the enormous brown enamel tea-kettle.

As usual, there are no mugs hanging on the hooks above the sink. Jim puts his head through the hatch.

"Pass us a pot, Les."

With pots of tea in our hands, we stand and talk for a few minutes, enjoying a smoke and the splendid glow from the range.

"Slack fishing," says Jim, re-lighting his pipe.

"Ay," Tich agrees, busy frying the chips for tea. "Let's get on wi' it and get 'ome, I says."

"Very slack," says Jim.

Ringelly drifts in and draws himself a mug of tea. "D'you know, that Greenland trip in *Landsella*, by, Ah never seen such fishing. We weren't towing no more than twenty minutes, and getting five and six bags. Three hauls and we'd lay to clear the decks. Couldn't cope with it. Working close in under the land, we were. . . ."

"That's how the *Norman* were lost," says Jim.

"You can 'ave Greenland," says Tich, rearranging his pots.

"Only deckie-learner were saved," Raymond says.

"If he were anything like you," says Tich scornfully, leaving the sentence unfinished, and Raymond grins. He is sixteen, a slovenly child with long fair hair which he is always shaking out of his eyes, and no particular stomach for the sea. One day, I suppose, he will turn into something, though I doubt if it will be a fisherman. He is too careful of his comfort, and too indolent; his thoughts are ashore with the tarts and duckies behind the counters of the Hesse Road shops and pubs, the shadow-substitutes of the local cinema.

"I had a watch once," he confides to me, "that me father give me. But I smashed it."

"Ah, shut up!" growls Jim.

"'Ave we got a thousand kit in yet? That's what Ah want to know," says Tich.

"Ay; near enough."

"About flaming well time too," and he peers into the oven, slams the door, and straightens up, cackling with laughter. "Ah could do with a dram."

"'E's the thirstiest cook as ever went in trawlers," Jim says and winks.

"Ah bloody well am," says Ted, and smacks his gums. "And ah've been going in 'em for thirty year. What time's 'e hauling?"

"Six o'clock," says Jim. "Just time for a bit of a read," and he clumps out, a figure of unshakeable solidity and calm.

"Ay," Ringelly says, "you work close in under the shore, and it's one gale after another and icebergs all round you. It's flaming terrible, is Greenland."

"Only man that likes Greenland is Leo," says Leslie through the hatch, and Ringelly chuckles. "Leo's mad." At this moment Lofty's gigantic figure appears at the door. "Raymond, gi' us a pot of tea," and Raymond, who is a little uncertain of Lofty's boisterous manner, goes and pours one out.

"Leo?" says Lofty and laughs and rolls himself a cigarette. Leo Romyn, DSC, is a legendary figure among distant-water trawler skippers. He came to fishing late—he was a deckie-learner at the age of thirty-two—and with a public-school background. Yet even among skippers who are sons of skippers and were down on the deck gutting at fifteen, he has a reputation for faultless navigation and fearless seamanship which fills his crews with admiration and alarm in about equal parts.

Lofty has sailed with him, and needs little encouragement to recount the most blood-curdling tales of their adventures. Now he starts, the passages of direct quotation rendered in Lofty's plummy version of a public-school accent.

"We were coming back from Greenland one time . . ."

"It's always Greenland with Leo," Ringelly says.

"Ay; well, we were on our way 'ome and it were blowing like a bastard, a full westerly gale, right oop our arses. Ah'm not afraid of water," and Lofty sniffs and clears his throat and grimaces, "Ah'm not afraid of water, but I was afraid to look aft at that bastard. And the cuke has to go and tell the old man there's a boat adrift. Flamin' 'ell! Of course, any other skipper would have bin dodging; but not Leo. 'She's full of water,' 'e says; 'She can't take any more. It's got to go somewhere. So why bother to dodge?'"

"They say 'e's never eased a ship down yet," says Ringelly.

"Ay, and it's truc. Anyway, this cuke goes up to the bridge and tells the old man that one of the boats is adrift. Ah were oop there when 'e come; Ah could've killed the . . . And Leo says: 'Put the vessel into wind!' 'e says. Putting our beam to that sea—Christ! Well, she come round all right; and 'e 'as all the 'ands aft, trying to bowse down this boat. It was adrift all right; it were practically over the flaming side; and there's Leo *inside* it. The Matc says to 'im: 'You'll go over the side, Skipper,' and all 'e says is: 'I think we'll lash her down with the messenger wire. Here, pass it under the keel,' and he starts to hang outboard of the boat, scrabbling round for the messenger. Well, Ah thought, that's the end of 'im! Anyway, we got this boat lashed down, and then 'e wants the boat-cover putting back on it! The bastard was stove in; it weren't no more than a handful of flaming planks; but 'e must 'ave the boat-cover back on, never mind the ship's on her ear and it's blowing about Force fifteen.

"Another time," says Lofty, "it were coming back from Greenland, too, 'e says to me: 'Lofty, we'll take a short cut through the ice.' I thought he meant bergs: 'e meant pack-ice! Seven hours we were, with all the bridge windows open, looking for a clear passage; and there's me, with me moofer round me eyes and ears, and there's Leo, open neck, no mittens; and Ah says to 'im: 'Aren't you cold, Skipper?' 'No,' he says. 'No. But it is a bit chilly!'"

"I were in the *Norman* trip afore she were lost," Leslie says. "Should have been in 'er when she was lost, only I wanted a trip off and a pal of mine went instead."

Nobody draws any moral from this; perhaps there is none to be drawn. It always seems a bit of a fluke that one is still alive. Only we happen to know Les left the *Roderigo* the trip before she was lost off the North Cape of Iceland with all hands: so much for luck.

"D'you know," Ringelly says in his pleasant drawl, "Leo were fishing off Iceland—West Horns, I think it were—and he fetched

up half a U-boat in his trawl? Ay—half a U-boat. And he tried to get it on deck, only the gear weren't strong enough and he had to let it go. 'E's a lad, is Leo."

He is presently skipper of a ship called the *Fair Try*, which is a completely new departure in fishing methods. The *Fair Try* is 3000 tons, a combined trawler and factory ship equipped with filleting machinery and full refrigeration, and she goes off to Newfoundland for three months at a time, catching her fish, filleting it, wrapping it and deep-freezing it on the spot. Unlike conventional trawlers, she streams her gear over the stern, and there is a fishing bridge aft from which the skipper can handle the ship during shooting and hauling. According to Laurie, she has to catch an average of 400 kit a day to pay, and so far, with the redoubtable Leo Romyn as skipper, she has succeeded.

"We don't want no flaming U-boats," says Tich with a rattle of baking-tins; "but if you want yer tea, it's ready—so . . ." this is directed at Lofty—"out ma flaming light, yer long streak of bullshit!"

"Why, you . . .!" growls Lofty, raising one huge, mutilated hand; and followed by a rain of curses and a cackle of laughter we move round to the mess-deck the other side of the hatch.

It is low, white-painted, brightly-lit, its deck-space almost entirely occupied by a large table, and by benches which run the length of it on either side. On the table is a table-cloth, rather the worse for spills, and on the table-cloth a framework of wood divided into squares—the fiddles that prevent the mugs and sauce-bottles and the plates full of Tich's renowned hot cakes from hurling themselves off on to the deck whenever the ship rolls. They will remain in place until we have rounded Spurn Point and are in the Humber. There is a clock on the bulkhead, and a loud-speaker wired to one of Sparks's radio sets, though there are no programmes to be heard as far north as this; there is a steam-heater with a Prince-of-Wales feathers design pricked on to its chromium front, and a row of three scuttles along the port side.

CAPE OF STORMS

This completely impersonal steel room is the one place, apart from their berths, where the crew can relax when they are not on the deck. Here they eat their meals and drink their tea and roll their fags, play occasional games of dominoes or crib (though this is not a card-playing ship) and argue about the shortcomings of Hull City football team and spin a yarn about other ships, other catches, other crews.

Now the watch that have been below for the past six hours have turned out and sit, tousle-haired and glassy-eyed under the hard white light—Jack Caine and Alfie and Ted. No bunch of men could look more piratical, with their white sea-boots and red tartan woollen chokers and their pepper and salt jerseys. They would look even more piratical if it weren't for the invention of the electric razor, which can be plugged into the ship's supply and used to keep bristles within bounds in all but the worst weather and all but the heaviest fishing.

The dioxies of fish and chips are sent sizzling through the hatch, the pots refilled once again with a fresh brew of tea, the plates of bread and buns wedged in among the fiddles, and the only sounds that break the silence are the sounds of hungry men at table.

TWENTY-FOUR

Time Displaced

IN a Norwegian newspaper brought aboard by one of the pilots when we were coming through the fjords there was a report of a hydrogen bomb having been dropped somewhere in the Barents Sea; but the Barents Sea is, fortunately, a big place, and we have not so far as we know been assailed yet by clouds of radio-active dust. But this evening, while we were staring out over the dark sea at nothing in particular, two parachute flares, burning with an intense, cruel light under a black brow of cloud, floated down

and dropped behind the horizon, where the loom of them glowed for several minutes.

"The flaming Russkis at it again!" George's voice grated behind me; and I thought how hard it is to argue convincingly with his raw pessimism, for it is a part of the pessimism towards things in general which has infected all but the most sanguine. Of course, towards the particular, personal course of his own life he is as cheerfully confident as the next man; and haven't all our lives been split between an inextinguishable personal hope and a general despair? Death, in somewhat remote and hazy terms, one accepts because one has no option; but not catastrophe. Even the cranks—they seem to have died out since the war, and little wonder—who used to wander round proclaiming the end of the world on Thursday week probably worried just as much as their totally sceptical hearers about their next year's income tax or their children's place in the end-of-term exams or the winner of Friday week's big race. We are all Noahs in a leaking ark, supposing that one day it will stop raining.

A ripe curse, anyway, on all the power-hungry who make a living out of our decent little hopes and fears—a murrain and a pox and a plague on them! Even here, far beyond the frontiers, there's no escaping them. What wouldn't one give to live in an age in which the fastest method of travel was the horse, the most dangerous weapon a muzzle-loaded cannon, and the loudest voice in the world would only carry a quarter of a mile in still air?

The flares, falling out of an empty sky, touch one on the raw, but the sting lasts little longer than the light of them. It is Friday night, they say—and what couldn't I do with a dozen of Guinness in the club, adds Jack. It is Friday night; the woman with the chrysanthemums on the bulkhead of the Skipper's cabin confirms it. Interesting. Even the effort of imagining what wife and family are doing at home has become strenuous and a bit frustrating. It is our eleventh day at sea, and the wind has suddenly freshened.

As we plug into it, geysers of spray erupt over the whaleback and beat against the bridge windows; it is, in fisherman's terms, a bit scuffly. That is not a peculiarity of Friday: the week-end, like night and day, like wife and children, have become mere symbols. This is time stripped of its familiar hitching-posts, an element like the sea through which we wallow towards the Holy Grail of 2000 kit.

TWENTY-FIVE

Chasing the Fish Around

SATURDAY morning dazzled the eyes with contrasts of light and shade: sunlight, low and harsh over mauve banks of cumulus in the south-east; squalls smudging the horizon all round us; and above them, masses of very pale apricot-coloured cloud. And no fish. So Laurie decided to haul the ends in and steam east to Teriberski. With a nor'westerly swell under our tails we corkscrewed along briskly; and now, as we turn across wind and sea to shoot away in ninety fathoms, the ship rolls and lurches, and the waves slop against the rail and smack at the men handling the gear.

"Ashore," Laurie remarks, "you'd take a look at a day like this, say: A bit breezy—and forget all about it. At sea it's different. As soon as the weather gets a bit scuffly, handling all this heavy gear, it slows you down."

Fishermen, like farmers, are hard to please when it comes to weather. Too much sea slows them down; so does too little. In a dead calm, such as we had off Iceland in the summer, the trawl has to be hauled inboard by main force, while in a moderate swell, as the weather-rail dips, so the sea brings the trawl up to the men who have only to grab all they can with net-hooks or gloved hands and hang on to it until the next roll in their favour, when

they grab some more. A little more swell, or a breaking sea, and they arc up to their waists in water, and the very effort of keeping their feet makes the job more difficult. Conditions at the moment are betwixt and between; there is nothing extraordinary about that; what distinguishes them from similar conditions ashore is that there is no overlooking them. Waves and spray, calm and swell, gale, rain and fog and every shift of wind and tide, all bear upon us, altering the stance and motion of the deck beneath our feet, demanding the attention of nerves and muscles, stinging our skin; while every change in the unbroken arch of the sky flaunts itself before our eyes.

The sun, however dazzling, has no heat, indeed can barely be bothered to haul itself above the southern horizon; yet even such a brief and tepid appearance is a comfort; and as the morning wore on, the cloud-banks were lit along their summits like mountains glittering with everlasting snow, their shadowed valleys, like evening valleys of the Alps, filled with shafts and billows of cloudy light, grey and pink, blue and white. Better this than the icy twilight of the winter months, the never-ending dark.

As for the land, we have merely exchanged one featureless line low down to the south'ard for another just like it; nor has this patch of sea anything to distinguish it from the patch we have just left. Even the fishing has not altered or improved; and the whole occupation resembles more and more some recondite and costly bit of dilettantism; an intolerable combination of water-divining and blind man's buff.

From ships fishing on North Deeps, a hundred miles off shore, Sparks has eavesdropped reports of good hauls which he duly passes on to the Skipper, hovering at the door of the berth with a wintry smile on his face. Sparks these days sheds a quintessential fishiness like an effluvium wherever he goes; it is so much a part of him that one is almost tempted to suppose that he secretes it; he is as mephitic as a skunk. It is the same smell as the shark-

fishermen of Achill Island are afflicted with; it is the smell, pervasive and oily, of fish-livers. For it is part of the Operator's job to drag the baskets of livers aft and decant them into the liver-boilers under the boat-deck, to render them down by running steam through them, and tap the oil off into tanks. Although the old system by which the oil was drawn off into barrels stowed along the weather-deck has been replaced by a system of pipes and cocks and tanks, there is no escaping the smell; a waft of it enters with him now.

"Ay," says Lauric. "We might do a steam to the Parson's Nose. Just so long as this breeze doesn't freshen; we'll lose our lee out there. We'll see what we get this haul, eh, Sparks?"

We saw: a split belly, and consequently no more than a shabby dozen baskets. "That does it," mutters Lauric. "While they're mending that lot, we can be doing a bit of steaming." So, at 9.0 p.m. he rang down for full ahead, and we went bucking off to the north'ard.

The skipper of a ship can tell on the instant, though he is dozing in his bunk, any change of revs or any shift of the weather. After a time, even a landsman begins to acquire something of the same response to the varying rhythms of the ship; and as I turned in that night, there was a vibrance and lightness about the feel of her under my backbone, quite different from the stolid gait of towing. Then in the small hours the revs dropped away, and I woke trying to disentangle the sound of the winch-horn from a dream in which its single note had taken on a quite different dream-reality and I lay, half-awake, aware from isolated sounds from the deck below, the jangling of the engine-room telegraph, of the course of shooting, ready to guess that wind and sea had moderated a little. As I dropped off to sleep again, the engines had settled down to the even, 76-rev beat of towing: the ship was back in harness.

We had not, I discovered when I surfaced on Sunday morning, gone as far afield as North Deep. Coming upon a group of ships

on the edge of Skolpen Bank during the night, Laurie had decided to try his luck; and for a time it seemed as if the compromise was going to pay. Conditions were ideal; a windless morning with a mild swell and a light overcast blinkering the daylight; and for a haul or two we got fifty baskets of good shelving fish, large, bright and firm. Then—as usual, one felt tempted to say—it dropped to twenty-five. Laurie was puzzled; and then he noticed that the big steel ball of the Dan Leno, instead of being brightly-polished, was dull and already yellowish with rust, suggesting that it had not been receiving its usual buffing on the bottom. This led him to check the echometers one against the other, and he discovered a discrepancy of 15-20 fathoms between them. The one we had been using was reading shoal; and if the gear had not been towing properly along the bottom, that might account for slack hauls when there was obviously fish about. So, when we shot again, it was with an extra two lengths of warp out; and Sparks was sent for to get his head inside the mendacious echometer and try and induce it to tell the truth.

"There's nothing certain about this game," Laurie remarked ruminatively, as the warps went reeling out and the ship's head came round on to course. "It's all chance—no; it's not *all* chance. Chance comes into it. Fish move from ground to ground at different times of the year; and from one depth of water to another in different weathers and at different times of the day. There's so many things you've got to take into account. Is it worth losing time doing a long hike in the hope of getting heavy fishing, or is it better to stay where you are and make do with what you're getting? Things like that. You've got to try and fathom out what the fish are doing." He shrugged and rang down for towing revs. "You get these slack periods, though; it's always the same. Everyone gets browned off. Then you pick up a couple of good bags and they're all as keen as mustard again, chasing the fish around."

Away to port over the darkling sea there is a Russian trawler

on an intercepting course. "You have to watch them," Laurie says; "they observe no rules of the road that I've ever heard of, and they never give way. But, by God, they catch fish. They work together; I've seen it many a time. If one of them's getting decent hauls, you can be sure that half-a-dozen, maybe a dozen of his pals will turn up within twenty-four hours."

Nationalized, and working as a team, it seems that they send out scouts to the various grounds; the scouts report their catches, and the remainder of the fishing fleet go wherever there is the most fish; a sensible and disciplined mode of operation that is repugnant to any individualist, and particularly to such a roaring individualist as the skipper of a British trawler. He, if he co-operates with his fellow-skippers at all, does so reluctantly, shrewdly, and with reservations. He may go so far as to call up a friend and mention that he is getting eighty baskets north-east of Skolpen; but he will keep the precise depth of water in which he is fishing to himself. Nevertheless, the hint may be enough to cause half-a-dozen other skippers to pull their ends in and steam to the same position.

"It's not so bad on these grounds," Laurie remarks, settled in a corner of the bridge with a pot of tea. "They're so vast; there's plenty of fish for everyone. And yet, even here, when you've got twenty or thirty ships milling round the same fifty square miles of ocean, you'd be surprised how soon they churn the bottom up and scare the fish away. It's different on the west coast. There the grounds are so small if you have more than two or three ships working one of them at the same time, you either scare the fish off in no time, or you're always coming foul of each other. You remember old Tosh on Klondyke?"

Klondyke is a small ground off the mouth of Arnarfjord in the NW tip of Iceland, and a favourite of Laurie's. It is surrounded by rough ground, and can only be worked with a dan-buoy down to mark the centre, and with a detailed knowledge of the marks ashore. When we were working it in the summer we

were joined almost immediately by one other ship, an old, tall-funnelled coal-burner.

"There's old Tosh!" Laurie had said, in the manner of a man recognizing an old friend. "He's seen me put my buoy down; now he'll keep on getting in my way. You see. He never thinks of putting a buoy down for himself. He's been coming here for years. Old Tosh!"

"Is he a friend of yours?" I had asked.

"Wouldn't know him if I met him in the street; he's from Fleetwood. We swear at each other over the radio sometimes."

For several days Tosh and ourselves wove our interlinking patterns round and round the same small patch of sea, and every now and then Laurie would throw a muttered curse or two at him as he wandered across our line of tow or chose to shoot across our bows just as we were intending to shoot away ourselves; and the squat line of cliffs, like slabs of pusser's cocoa, ten miles away across the smooth summer sea, grew aching familiar.

"I'll never forget," Laurie says now, "a year or two back; it was the spring of the year, calm, but with very heavy rain, and I went down to Breidi Bay to a small ground where I thought I could catch some fish; but it was too thick for me to pick up my marks in order to drop a buoy; so while I was waiting for it to clear, I filled in time with a dozen or more ships that were fishing a bigger ground close by.

"As soon as there was a break, I nipped across to this little ground I knew, found my marks, dropped my dan, and caught 750 kit in thirty hours. Then the weather cleared, and all these other sods, seeing I was on to a good thing, came bustling across after me.

"Only what they didn't know was, that between the fine-ground gully where I was and the bank they were on, there was a patch of foul bottom. I had lifted my trawl as I crossed it; but they hadn't seen that; and they towed straight over it and pulled their gear to pieces!

"I hauled off when I saw them coming, left 'em to sort themselves out for twenty-four hours. When I went back, they'd all pushed off somewhere else; had the place to myself; got another 500 or 600 kit in and was off home."

Perhaps I looked a bit quizzical at a description of what almost sounded like a variation on the ancient and prosperous practice of the Wreckers, for Laurie added: "I didn't do it deliberately. Don't think that. What I mean is, you can't be doing with half-a-dozen or a dozen ships on a little ground like that. The fish would be gone in five minutes. And besides, if they'd watched me fishing, why, they'd have been sitting up on their bridges with a pencil and paper jotting down the marks before you could say knife; and that'd be my nice little private ground, gone, finished. You can't afford to do it.

"That little ground in Breidi Bay I've been telling you about, it's inside the new limit-line now, but that was discovered by my father in the early days. That and a few others, there's not many skippers know how to fish them; but if you do, they pay dividends.

"Why, I remember once on Klondyke, getting 1000 kit in three days; and there was another poor bastard not half-a-mile away getting nothing. If I'd tipped him the wink, he'd have come over, sketched the land, noted all the marks; and the next time I went there I'd find he'd cut in first. I was sorry for the poor bastard, all the same!"

And soon it was hauling-time, and the cod-end popped up to the surface in an encouraging manner, and when the Bosun had won his tussle with the knot there were sixty baskets of cod and haddocks alive and shining in the pounds. Two hours later, when we hauled again, there were only twenty-five, and Laurie offered to cut his throat there and then. On consideration he discarded this all-too-simple solution to the problem, and decided to pull the ends in once more and steam, this time to the Parson's Nose.

The Parson's Nose and the Northern Lights

FOR several hauls Laurie has been looking darkly at the fore-door every time it has come up to the gallows: something in the setting of the two triangular brackets offends him. When fishing is slack, a skipper is suspicious of everything from sun, moon and stars and the workings of an ambiguous providence to the smallest detail of the gear; and this particular door was sent ashore for repairs last time the ship was in. Since no sailor can bring himself to speak of the vices practised by dockyards, it is more than likely that it is the fore-door that is preventing us catching any fish. During Sunday night, therefore, while we were on our way to North Deep and the Parson's Nose, the laborious job of swapping the starboard fore-door for its opposite number on the port side was put in hand. The simplest way of doing this, owing to their bulk and weight, is to keel-haul them; and this is what George did. The ship is stopped; a wire is passed from for'ard under the ship's bottom, the door is shackled on, dropped into the sea, and hauled up by winch the other side. At the same time the cod-ends were thoroughly checked for holes. Nothing must be left to chance.

The encouraging result of these operations—reinstating once again the rule of law for the rule of luck—was a double bag at 5.30 on Monday morning, another at 9.0, and a decent single bag at 11.45; good shelving material, all of it, big green cod—some so big and so leper-marked with white patches that they looked of great age—and a fair proportion of the large haddocks known as jumbos. This cheered everyone up—even the Chief, on one of his surreptitious forays on to the bridge, ostensibly to check the oil level in the telemotor: and down the fish-room, where suddenly there was plenty of hard work to be done, hard work suddenly

seemed no privation. Ten minutes between the end of shelving and the next haul for a pot of tea and a drag was a well-earned recompense.

So cheerful was everyone that George, cautiously, committed himself to the opinion that we must have over 1500 kit aboard; and indeed the geography of the fish-room alters with every haul. The after bulk-pounds are filling up, and the outboard shelf-pounds—those against the ship's side—are complete to the deck-head. Already, working from aft, a second row has been started inboard of them; and the staging is rapidly narrowing down to the width of a gang-plank. But the firmest evidence of all to our progress is provided by the alteration to the washer. Up to now it has been rigged so that the fish are bundled out of the after end of it: now, the whole contraption is shuffled forward on its rails, and the weir is rigged at the for'ard end, so that the fish are delivered to the for'ard part of the fish-room. This is a very good sign indeed.

By 3.0 in the afternoon it was dark and raining; but we continued to get fair hauls all day. It is rather like saving money, this business of getting your voyage in. If you put enough pennies into your money-box, you eventually find you've collected a pound or two; but one or two half-crowns make a lot of difference. In those terms, our recent hauls have been equivalent to about a bob or one-and-six.

The rain cleared off about 10.0, and I scrambled up on to the bridge-top to look at the first real display of the aurora that there has been during the trip. Often behind the clouds there has been a mild glow, like moonlight, a luminous pulse in the sky without apparent source or focus; but now, from a vortex of light at the zenith, phosphorescent streamers fall to the horizon, north and south; and the vortex itself swirls and eddies like the tides of a river of light, dividing, then reforming to ray out and throw off sparks and splinters of brightness which themselves revolve and fragment and reform. The streamers merge and coalesce until

“SHE DOES THIS EVERY DAM’ TRIP”

one arc of the sky is veiled behind a gauze of light that dims the lights of the stars.

I cling to the cold iron of the handrail in the singing wind, and the black sea, clotted and mottled with foam, lunges away below me, and the black vault of the sky sways like a blowing tree, bending its branches of fire. Shivering, straining back my head, I stare into the empty hole of heaven between the chattering stars. The comfortable roof of the world has been torn off, and I am plunging headlong downwards through space.

“ . . . it is colder now

there are many stars

we are drifting

North by the Great Bear. . . .

Long since we passed the flares of Orion

Each man believes in his heart he will die. . . .”

I climb down the iron rungs in the dark and pull the fringes of a familiar world round my shoulders like a coat to keep out that uncathly wind.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“She does this every dam’ trip”

SUNDAY, established by Tich’s special Sunday tea—a prodigious array of cakes and tarts and buns, all white with sugar and decorated with little silver balls that might well be ball-bearings, and by a surprise ration of his special pickled pork—Sunday has gone, and Monday with its tally of tolerable bags. Today is Tuesday, once again, and we have been at sea a fortnight. Therefore if the trip is to conform to the normal of three weeks, we have a mere two days left in which to complete our catch. Any hints, queries, insinuations or soundings on this matter, however

guarded or round-about, are best left unmade: we shall go home when the Skipper decides we shall go home and not ten seconds before.

Recent hauls have not shown that tendency to diminish which successive hauls on our previous grounds have done, but have remained steadily unspectacular in quantity and excellent in quality—good shelving fish; and we could do with twice as much of it. Something nearly always happens to break the monotony, though; and when we shot away at 8.15 in the fine blue morning, something very odd happened indeed. The warps became crossed. The only way in which one could imagine this happening would be for the trawl to roll completely over, once; and so Laurie decided to try and roll it back again by spinning the ship to starboard at full speed; which he did, muttering gloomily: "We shall be lucky to get away with this." When I thought of what he was trying to do, I had to agree with him. Only complete and utter paralysation of the gear, it seemed to me, could follow upon an attempt to rotate the whole huge, soggy bulk of net, with all its attendant ironmongery, at speed, under water. However, the turn came out of the warps all right; whether there was anything left of the trawl we should see when we hauled.

We towed a full two hours, which struck me as being the summit of confidence or optimism, and when we hauled it was to find that the belly was out and the bag, in consequence, mcagre. "It might have been worse," said the Skipper with non-committal gloom; and then abruptly: "I think we'll do a hike. If we can only get that last 200 or 300 kit of shelfers, to hell with everything, we'll go home, eh?"

I concurred with a proper show of indifference: it does not become a pleasurer to betray too unseemly an enthusiasm for the end of the trip. "We'll go back to Navolok," Laurie continued. "We were catching fish there earlier; and it's on our way."

So he rang on full ahead, and the bows swung round to the SSW and into wind and sea; and as we punched our way in

“SHE DOES THIS EVERY DAM’ TRIP”

towards the Russian coast, the watch began to fit a new belly under the spray that flew over the whaleback and pelted down on to the deck.

We had steamed a bare sixty miles, however, when we came upon a covey of lights which Laurie declared to be *Northella* with a buoy down, and he decided to shoot away in 125 fathoms and try his luck. One has grown accustomed now to plugging through this empty wilderness of water and coming suddenly upon one small ship, or a group of ships, unconcernedly towing, hauling, shooting, under the withering Arctic sky. Only if one rids one’s mind of its conditioned refusal to be surprised does one realize afresh how extraordinary it really is; as if one should come upon a man growing cabbages in the middle of the Sahara.

By 9.30 the same evening we had had two hauls of forty and sixty baskets respectively, and the sea which had been unoccupied except for *Northella*, on the horizon, and ourselves, was now shimmering with lights through the small rain. Since we had informed no one of our position or intentions, one wondered how they happened to have arrived there, materializing round us in the dark like Africans round a camp-fire.

All night we continued to weave our way among the scattered lights of other ships and collect good hauls; and at 10 o’clock next morning, when it was just about to be admitted that another two good hauls would see us home, we had a bad split in the square. Laurie was beside himself. “The bastard trawl’s in half!” he said in a stifled voice, glowering down at the tatters of net being hauled inboard. “No wonder fishermen eat their young!”

When he had got his breath back, and had resigned himself to a two-hour job at this moment, when the end of the trip was in sight, he pulled off his cap and scratched his head and said sourly: “She does this every dam’ trip. She always plays us up, does this ship. One trip, the last haul, a nice seventy or eighty baskets would have done us just right, we picked up an orcetle. A big brute, like a shark, about fifteen feet long; and this bastard had chafed a dirty

big hole in the cod-end *and* eaten all the fish. We split him open and his belly was full of 'em. Another time, we were having a few last hauls near the fjords after a spell of bad weather off shore. That time we picked up a wreck, and that knocked a bloody big hole in the trawl and it wasn't worth repairing it. Another time, we were at Bear Island, real heavy fishing, four and five bags every time. There were half-a-dozen of the company's ships all racing to get their voyage and get off home; one more decent haul and we'd have been there, first. And we hauled: we'd got FOUR fish! Not four baskets—*FOUR fish!* All the fish in the ocean, and we'd got four of 'em! This time it's a bloody big split. If only she'd behave herself for once and let us get those last two good hauls; but oh no, she won't!

On deck, the team was already hard at work with twine and braiding-needles, while on the bridge Laurie chafed at the delay and frustration of it, and at the wayward and unpredictable bad habits of ships and fish. "If we'd just got that extra 200 or 300 kit, I'd say leave it. We'll go home. But with less than 2000 kit, why, you can't do it!" With a snort of disgust he flapped down to the berth, flung his cap on the seat-locker, lit one of his rare cigarettes; then went back to the chart-table and started to lay off a track with the parallel rulers. After a time, he looked up. "We'll do two more hauls for luck, and then we'll pack it in. Say we shoot at noon; we haul at 2.30, shoot again at 3.0—if we don't get another split!—we'll start steaming at 6.0. It'll take us 22 hours near enough to get into Honningsvaag. If we order the pilots for 4 o'clock tomorrow afternoon we shan't be far out."

He puts his head out, and calls Sparks, who drifts in and accepts the news without visible emotion. Sparks, who used to fly Lancasters, regards himself, one cannot help feeling, as being wasted on a job like this. As a result he does not do it very well, and this casts suspicion on his whole character. Was he, one begins to wonder, quite such a dashing airman as he would have one believe; or was he then as puzzled and affronted at the injus-

“SHE DOES THIS EVERY DAM’ TRIP”

tices of that time—at not getting a commission, perhaps, or being overlooked in despatches?—as he is now at finding himself a trawler Wireless Operator? The deck-hands, who are on to an affectation like a terrier on to a rat, and resent the fact that he does not contribute his share of tea, Carnation milk and sugar to the endless private pots of tea which he, nevertheless, expects to share, treat him with an off-hand contempt. If he had not let it be known quite so openly that he found the rest of the ship’s company “not quite my type, old boy”, he might not have been led to discover that he was not theirs. Yet he is harmless enough under the thin varnish of service superiority; and when, one night, he stopped shooting a line about books, of which he knew nothing, and flying, of which he remembered far too much, and started talking instead about astronomy—for which he had a true, dispassionate enthusiasm—he received the attention and respect which he claimed in vain for the rest. Poor old Sparks, condemned to inhabit for ever a world of grievance of his own contriving!

He vanishes now with the Skipper’s instructions, leaving behind him a faint exhalation of cods’ livers, as surreptitious as a fart. Laurie grimaces. “Well, that’s it. We’ve made our decision. Two more hauls, and away! And if we have a fair crossing, we’ll go for Tuesday’s tide, Wednesday’s market. We’ll have 2000 kit, with any luck. But the Boss is still going to want to know what’s happened to those flats!”

The weather has changed once more; the blue days have gone. Grey skies sag down on to a lumpy, white-capped sea, and the ship rolls even with the gear down to steady her. The last haul but one produced sixty baskets; now we are on the last tow of all, and, since our course is SW, already on our way. The Skipper takes the wheel and reads off the ship’s head while Sparks spins the DF loop in the corner of the wireless room and picks up a cross-bearing on Navolok and Teriberski. Armed with this, the Skipper leaves the wheel to look after itself—which it is well able

to do, except for an occasional shove, when we are towing—and plots the position on the chart.

"West by south should just about do us," he says. There is something approximate and casual about his navigation; something sporadic, as well. He hasn't looked at a chart for 48 hours. He catches my expression, mingled irony and admiration, perhaps, and chuckles. "I know it looks a bit rough and ready to you; but we found the Parson's Nose all right—a spot out in the middle of the ocean—didn't we?"

"I took your word for it."

"All right. You see. When we've hauled, we'll steer W by S, and at about 3.0 in the morning, we shall pick up the land somewhere along here"—his finger moved along the coast to point between Vardo and Makur. "There are no DF stations along here, but we can pick it up on the radar. Then it's simply a quick run along the coast to Porsangerfjord. You think my navigation's ropy: d'you know there are skippers who won't go near the land? They won't go through the fjords. Not they. It beats me how they find their way about, but they seem to, somehow."

In fact the casualness is deceptive, the fruit of mastery and long experience; and when care and precision are required, they are there to hand.

We go back on to the bridge and look out at the brightly-lit deck, and the familiar patterns of red bulwarks, red gallows, black bollards, and the hideous yellow graining on the for'ard bulkhead under the whaleback, of black rigging and the streaming, black-ruled lines of the deck-planking. The last of the previous haul is on its way down into the fish-room, and the deck is momentarily empty except for a little acid-green lump-fish, a jenny or two, and the red and white and purple guts swilling about in the pounds. Beyond, in the blackness, there are eight or nine ships—a review of lights—scattered about the eastern horizon.

It was nearly over; and as my mind turned towards the home-

“SHE DOES THIS EVERY DAM’ TRIP”

ward voyage, I became oppressed with the endlessness, the repetition, the monotony of this manner of life. Five days steaming in, two days at home, five days running off again: in less than a fortnight the ship and her crew would be back on this same spot, or another not far away; the trawl would be rigged along the weather-rail; the cod-ends fitted with new hides; the washing-machine erected. The winch-horn would blow and the winch-diesel would start up immediately with a rumble below the bridge. Ahead would lie another fortnight’s work, another eighty hauls with its tally of splits and stranded warps, of hope and hope foregone, another 2000 kit of fish to be gutted and stowed and shelved: and it would be darker and colder. Soon the spray would begin to freeze as it dashed aboard, and there would be more of it to freeze as the gales of winter got into their stride; the fish would freeze in the pounds, and the ropes and gear would be like iron, and there’d be no sight of the sun.

And I remembered Laurie and Jim the Bosun talking, when we ran into our first sharp glitter of frost, of a trip to Bear Island in the *St Romanus* in the dead of winter. It was black frost the whole trip—“you could just see the other ships shimmering and shaking through the frost”—and if the fish weren’t cleared the moment they were landed on the deck, they froze into a solid lump; and while you were clearing the fish, the cod-end froze, and if there were any mending to be done after that, the net had to be thawed out with the steam-hose. The *St Romanus* had a steam-winch, and it was essential to drain the water out of it between hauls. They had got 800 kit aboard in conditions of extreme difficulty and discomfort, but without mishap, when they put steam on to the winch to haul after a long tow, and with a roar and a clatter the thing blew up and the cylinder-end flew off and landed up for’ard somewhere under the whaleback: either somebody had forgotten to drain it, or the cock had frozen before all the water was out of it.

There were spares for it, bolted to the casing behind it and

solidified under many layers of paint; and it took the Chief many hours, working in the zero weather, to get them free, clean them up, and finally reassemble the winch. At the end of it, the winch was working and they were able to haul; but he had severe frost-bite in his knees and fingers; and for fear of gangrene, they had to be content with their 800 kit and set off for home. The Chief was in agony all the way; and when at last they docked and he came on deck ready to go ashore, it was to see his wife waiting for him at the dockside in mourning. Two days before, a ship called the *Edgar Wallace*, waiting her turn to enter the lock-pit, had dragged her anchor and, being caught by the tearing tide, had hit a sandbank and capsized, with the loss of all but three of her crew. One of those who had died had been the Chief's son.

It was like the sketch of a Greek tragedy in its assembly of cruel detail; the father returning maimed by the ice, the son swept away under the lights of home. Every year, overshadowing the day-to-day hardships and injuries, there are ships that do not come back—ships and men. No wonder that fishermen have a steadiness of temper and an economical clarity of values that fortify them against the hammering they take each trip and set them apart from the safe and anxious people of the land.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“Steer West by South”

THE hands of the dummy-clock on the chartroom bulkhead are set to 5.30. Laurie glances at the chronometer, and pauses with his hand on the red button. At exactly 5.30 he presses it—the last haul shall run its full time; that is a matter of common honour, of self-respect—and within three seconds the diesel detonates below us. Somebody opens the sound-proof door that leads from the

companionway to the engine-room, and a dry roar of sound pours through it, and is at once cut off.

The winch is already turning, levelling up the warps. The Skipper switches the bridge radio over to the loudspeakers and snaps into the microphone his staccato “Eh—oh!”—and waits for the twang as the warps spring out of the towing-block. The winch starts turning again and the heavy grey-green wire snakes in over the gallows sheaves and round the bollards, shedding water and crackling as it beds down on the turns already on the winch-barrels. George and the Bosun are manning the winch-controls and check the marks as they come inboard. As the doors break surface there is a shout from aft, and the winch slows while they come up to the sheave with their shunting-yard clatter. Ringelly for’ard, Alfie aft, whip off the G-link and slip the stopper-chain through the bracket. “Lower away!” The doors are clear, out of the circuit, and the winch accelerates to bring in the cables. Next the Dan Leno and butterfly soar out of the sea and clash against the sheaves. The winch stops; George and Jim wind on the brakes and transfer the drive to the end-barrels. The quarter-rope is unclipped and handed aft along the rail and hitched to the gilson. Laurie switches on the searchlight, and there, spread out in the aquarium light alongside, is the great undulating jelly-fish of the trawl. The birds make their arabesques along the edges of the light, and the thin snow flows past, blurring the black and yellow figures. Beyond them, beyond the limits of the lights, the bows lift and veer through reeling arcs of blackness, and white water gushes over the rail and brings with it the sodden swathes of net. . . .

And far out and effervescent, the cod-end bobs up like an ancient overfilled string shopping-bag. It contains seventy . . . sixty . . . well call it sixty baskets—no more. There is no comment from Laurie, standing beside me in the dark: he reaches up and flicks off the searchlight. And soon, for the last time, the bag comes scraping over the rail, swings above the deck and hangs,

with the water pouring out of it and the isolated parts of fish protruding through the meshes, while George ducks under it and loosens the knot.

"Lower away!"

As the bag sinks, so it abruptly deflates, and the fish spill out like mercury over the pounds.

For a few minutes longer the ship lies motionless, broadside to wind and sea, while the bobbins are hoist over the rail and the complete trawl is bundled on to the deck. Then the bridge-door clicks open, and a figure comes out of the glowing shadows to the wheel.

"Well, that's that!" says the Skipper, and rams the handle of the engine-room telegraph hard over. The bell jangles: two seconds later it jangles again, and the pointer joins the handle at Full Ahead.

"West by south!"

"West by south," echoes Jack Caine at the wheel.

The ship shudders and gathers way. The helmsman spins the wheel, and round the compass card in its bowl of light—the old-fashioned rose of the days of sail—the ship revolves. Below us, for the first time for two weeks, the deck lights are out, and the steaming-lights at the masthead throw a faint radiance downwards. With every alternate thrust of the bow, the ship cuts through a semi-circle of fizzing sea as the bow-wave rolls outwards and breaks like a wave breaking on a reef.

Fishing is forgotten. We are a ship on passage. We have destinations.

"And the first thing I'm going to do," says the Skipper, "is have a dam' good sleep!"

Part Three

HOMeward BOUND

"Into the Limits of the North"

AT 3.0 a.m. precisely we picked up the Norwegian coast between Vardo and Makur on the radar; and as dawn broke—a grey, swaggering, slccting dawn—and we careered along with wind and sea chucking us under the quarter, the fringe of cliffs came looming through the squalls to port above the spikes of the waves.

"A typical morning in the Arctic," says George, who has been on watch since midnight and is gazing non-committally for'ard. "Overcast, grey sea, snow showers. Do you see anything beautiful in that?"

"In a wild sort of way, yes."

"That's more than I do. You can have the Arctic as far as I'm concerned."

The men on watch, Ted and Alfie, grouped in the unchanging attitude of seamen, legs wide apart, arms folded on the hand-rails below the bridge-windows, stare out at the monochrome of land, sea and sky, and dream moodily of home.

"I could just do with a good party," says Alfie, taking over the wheel. "A dozen bottles of dark, two or three bottles of rum, me slippers on and the records playing on the old gramophone. Lovely!" He has a sharp, almost rapacious face and hard bright eyes, and one expected longings less domesticated, more unbridled.

"Ah could do with a real Sunday dinner," says Ted. He is still anxiously awaiting news of his first-born ("Make sure it isn't a double bag!" says the Skipper) and will be glad when the trip is

over. Running off, it was toothache; all the time it is the ache of trawling. Even trawlermen disgust him. "They spend three weeks in each other's company, arguing; and the first thing they do when they get ashore is arrange to meet so they can go on arguing!"

The Skipper, his sleep interrupted by the early morning land-fall but considerably refreshed, comes up on to the bridge. Even in this ship, where authority puts on no airs, the Skipper's presence imposes a noticeable reticence; and there is silence while he glances at the course, at the clock, and out at the cliffs which are sidling slowly past eight or ten miles away to port. "Ay, that's Tanafjord; and there's Omgang Klubb next-door to it. And there's Sletnes—the first headland. Nord Kyn's beyond; can't see it yet." The cliffs run in a level line, grey-white with the thin early snow along their tops, with the spray of bursting seas below, and scored with deep cracks and fissures; and the mouths of the fjords smoking like the mouths of hell.

Laurie pointed to the entrance to Tanafjord. "That's where I was pinched."

"In *Southella*, wasn't it?" asked George.

"Ay." He turned to Ted who was off the wheel. "Here, Ted, fetch us up a pot of tea, will you? What's for breakfast, by the way?"

"Fishcakes, Skipper."

"Oh ay. I'll not go down. Ask Tich to bring us up a couple at the same time." He patted his stomach. "I had a good sleep; now I feel a bit peckish."

"Was you inside the limit, like, Skipper?" Alfie asked.

"Oh ay," said Laurie cheerfully. "We were inside all right; but I didn't admit it. Why, I'd been poaching a few haddocks inside the limit along here for three or four trips; but I chose my weather, d'ye see, and I never got caught. Wouldn't have got caught this time, I dare say, if it hadn't been for this bloke—Third Hand, it was—getting earache.

“‘INTO THE LIMITS OF THE NORTH”

“It was near the end of the trip, and I wanted a few hundred kit of haddocks just to make up my voyage. There was a gale of wind off the land, and all the little local fishing-boats were inside; so we went right in, no more than a couple of miles off the land. We’d had several decent hauls when this third hand comes up on to the bridge complaining that he’s got earache and wants to be taken in to see a doctor. Well, I knew it wasn’t anything; everybody has earache; but I got the medical book out and looked it up and I said to him: ‘According to the book, earache’s only caused by one of two things’—and he looked at me, questioning like—‘wax or syphilis!’ ‘I haven’t got syph,’ he says, a bit aggrieved. ‘Then it must be wax,’ I said, ‘and I’m not stopping fishing and going into Honningsvaag because a bloke’s got a bit of wax in his ear. If it was syphilis it might be different.’ And off he goes.

“But you can’t refuse to take a man in to see a doctor if he insists, it doesn’t matter if you’re up at Bear Island; and this bloke comes back on to the bridge after an hour or two saying the pain’s terrible and he wants to be taken in to see the doctor—he was sure he was dying—so I said: ‘All right, but you can wait till I’ve had my daylight.’ I was pretty chocker, as you can imagine, having to break off fishing just when we were nearly at the end of the trip and conditions were just right, particularly as I knew bloody well that there was nothing much the matter with him. Anyway, when we hauled that night, I pulled the ends in and took him into Honningsvaag. And that was how the trouble started.”

The engine-room door opened down below, letting in the noise and the sweet diesel smell of the engines, and Ted came up on the bridge with a pot of tea and the fishcakes; and Laurie squeezed them between two slices of bread and went on with his mouth full. “I didn’t tell them ashore that we had 1200 kit aboard for four or five days’ fishing, but somebody must have done, because the agent said to me: ‘You can’t have been far.’ And he was right. I heard afterwards that the fishermen along the coast

had seen our lights close inshore and had put the word about; and so when we went back to the same spot, they were on the lookout for us. That was the mistake I made.

"Anyway, in twenty minutes this third hand is back on board again, as right as rain. They'd pumped his car out, and the pain had disappeared! So away we went. We came away from the quay, wheel hard over, and burst an oil-line in the telemotor! Back we stagger to the quay again with no power on the steering, heave a line ashore, and start repairing the telemotor!"

Laurie laughed and took another bite at the enormous sandwich. "You don't have to worry about your weight," he said to George, and we laughed. The Skipper and his weight was a struggle we were in on. "By this time I was beginning to get just a bit browned off; and when you're browned off you tend to take risks. Well, when we got back to Sletnes, Tanafjord, just about where we are now, the weather had changed. When we'd been here before, as I said, there was a gale of wind off the land and very heavy snow-showers, and we had it to ourselves. Now the wind had dropped, it was bollocky calm, and the local liners were out in their hundreds. It was dark, of course, January time; but I could see them on my radar—this came up later, during the trial: and rather than get mixed up with them, I cut short my tow and hauled. We did this a few times, and suddenly, without any warning, somebody turns a searchlight on us. I didn't know who he was; thought he was probably a fisherman; and when I saw him laying a buoy, I still didn't twig. Then he came up on my beam and yelled something—it could have been the compliments of the season for all I knew. But by this time I'd just about had enough of all these little boats messing up my tows; it was getting too crowded altogether; and what with blokes flashing searchlights and laying dans and yelling at me, I decided to pull the ends in; so we pushed off to Vardo, intending to get the rest of the trip in there."

Ted took the wheel from Alfie, repeating the course:

“INTO THE LIMITS OF THE NORTH”

“West by north, a half north.”

“Keep her west by north,” said the Skipper. “We’re clear of Sletnes now; we can start to come round a bit.”

“Keep her west by north,” repeated Ted, and put on five degrees of port helm.

“We’d no sooner got there than another gale sprang up; so I decided to set off for home. We’d almost got what we wanted, anyway, so off we went. I’d been thinking a bit about this bloke with his searchlight; and when we got to Honningsvaag I’ll admit I took a quick look into the harbour to see if there was a gunboat there; and if there had been, I should have gone outside. But there wasn’t; so I breathed a sigh of relief and in we went. Little did I know that the bastards were waiting for me just round the corner!”

“You’d guessed the bloke who dropped the buoy was a gunboat, like, Skipper?” Alfie asked.

“I was a bit suspicious, I’ll admit,” Laurie said, “thinking about it afterwards. Guilty conscience, I daresay. The thing is, when you’re doing a bit of poaching, you tend to be on the lookout for them—just the same as any law-breaker has a weather eye open for the coppers. So I wasn’t taking any chances—or I thought I wasn’t.” He chuckled a little ruefully. “We picked up our pilots and started off through the fjords, full speed. We hadn’t been going above an hour when a submarine and a small escort vessel suddenly appear, come close alongside, and order us to stop. Well, I knew that was my lot then.

“They put an officer and a prize crew aboard us, and we about turn and go back into Honningsvaag, under arrest, with the sub on one side and this little escort vessel the other. Then at Honningsvaag, the submariners were replaced by a prize crew from the escort vessel, the sub vanishes, and the two of us go on round to Vardo.

“They were a prize crew and all,” Laurie said, laughing. “Young national servicemen; came on board with their packets of

sandwiches, and seasick, the lot of them. I could have locked 'em all up as easy as winking and slipped off. The escort vessel would never have caught us. Can't think why I didn't: it seems obvious when you think about it afterwards. Anyway, while the 'prize crew' were all fully engaged, puking their hearts out, Sparks and I got busy rubbing out all the bearings on the large-scale charts and stuffed 'em away at the back of the chart-drawer. I mean, there's not much point in denying everything if there's evidence on your charts to contradict you, is there?"

Alfie nodded sagely, and Ted at the wheel rolled himself a cigarette, and the cliffs vanished behind the driving snow.

"When our little procession arrived at Vardo," Laurie continued, "we were all under arrest, of course; no one was allowed to leave the ship—though where the hell they imagined anyone would want to go to in that god-forsaken hole is more than I can say—and after a bit the solicitor's clerk came aboard to find out what I had to say. As he didn't speak a word of English and the only Norwegian I know is 'Thank you very much' and 'Good afternoon' we didn't make much headway until I got hold of the harbour-master to come and interpret. I denied everything, naturally. I'd decided what I was going to say. I didn't think I was inside the line; but if I was, it was simply because I'd been forced to alter course to avoid all these little fishing-boats and so as not to foul up their gear. Did I look the kind of bloke, I asked, who'd be deliberately poaching? And this little clerk bloke—he wore a fur hat, I remember, which he never took off—shook his head: that comes of having an honest face, you sec." Laurie chuckled, and you could tell that he had enjoyed every minute of it. "Well, we started this palaver at 10 p.m., and at 3.0 in the morning we were still busy cooking the books, this clerk, the harbour-master and I. But at last they went off; and I'd hardly had time to turn in and get a bit of sleep when two or three blokes—fish-merchants, I suppose they were—came on board to assess the value of the gear and catch. I managed to keep them out of the

“INTO THE LIMITS OF THE NORTH”

fish-room; told them we'd only got a few hundred kit of cod; and they valued the lot at £700. They valued the gear at £1000; and then they presented me with a piece of paper to the effect that if I cared to admit my guilt and buy the whole boiling—catch and gear—back for £6000, then I could be off home without any further nonsense.

“Well, I soon told them what they could do with that; and so the next thing, I was marched off to the police-station and formally charged. My main worry was to get the ship off home before the catch went rotten. As it happened, the Bosun held a skipper's ticket, but the Mate didn't; so after a bit of arguing, I signed the Bosun on as skipper, put the Mate in charge, and away they went about 10 o'clock the same night. Between them they got the ship home all right, and the voyage made six thousand!

“So that was that, and I went off to the one and only hotel in Vardo.”

“It's a one-horse dump, they tell me,” said George.

“Ay, it is. The Germans knocked it flat before they left, so everything you see there now has been built since the war; and it looked proper unfinished: dirt roads, concrete buildings, a bit like our prefabs; even the church was made of concrete. But the people were very friendly. It was rather funny, as a matter of fact. When I turned in that night, after seeing the ship off, the hotel was empty; next morning, when I came down to breakfast, it was full, and there was I, nodding and smiling and saying good morning to all these characters, and it was only when I was in the court, later on, and had a look round, I realized they were all witnesses for the prosecution! Ay; they were fishermen from Gamvik and Omgang Klubb who'd seen my lights off shore, and the Skipper of the *Nord Kyn*—Captain Dittmassen, and a very charming bloke—who'd fixed the position of the buoy, and the Skipper of the *Ampløy* which had dropped it: they'd all been brought along on the mail-boat to say their piece. Not that it made any difference to me who they all were: I couldn't under-

stand a word they said, and so we went on nodding and smiling at each other just the same.

"After breakfast we all trooped along to the court, which was more like a schoolroom than anything else, with the three judges perched up on a sort of *daïs*: one pukka judge, in the middle, and the local baker on one side of him and the local blacksmith—kind of JP's I suppose they were—on the other. It was all very nice and friendly, anyway; and even the Chief of Police, who started by being a bit stropky, relaxed after a bit.

"Anyway, one by one, all the characters I'd been saying good morning to in the hotel got up and said their piece. The Skipper of the *Nord Kyn* said that he'd checked the position of the buoy which the *Amplay* had dropped, and it was 1.4 miles inside the limit line; and the Skipper of the *Amplay* described how he'd shone his searchlight on us and dropped the buoy to mark our position, and how his son, who was an officer in his ship and was there in court had shouted: 'You are inside the limit-line and you will be reported' or something of the sort.

"I made a lot of not having heard what was shouted at me, because in international law the gunboat has to inform the ship that she is inside the line and will be arrested; and I said, which was quite true, that I hadn't understood a word this lad had said. So the old judge made him stand up in court and yell for the benefit of everyone concerned exactly what he had yelled at me, and that was a great success, because no one could understand a word of it either.

"That was a point in my favour, and another one came up when the bench started to question me about the radar. I think they imagined that what you see on the screen is a recognizable image of the object; a ship looks like a ship, a buoy like a buoy, instead of a blob of light which might be almost anything; and they were quite astounded when I told them that it was impossible to distinguish between the blip made by a reflector on a buoy and a small fishing-vessel. In fact, I don't think they believed me,

“‘INTO THE LIMITS OF THE NORTH”

because they called Dittmassen again; but of course he had to back me up.

“Well, the trial or whatever you’d call it went on for three days, and then, all of a sudden like, it was all over. No summing-up, no verdict, nought. The judge said something about the findings of the court being made known; then he and everybody else shook me by the hand and said how sorry they all were, and it was all very nice and friendly, and I felt quite sorry when I found myself on the mail-boat that evening, bound home.”

“You didn’t get away with it, though?” George said.

“No; but the total fine was only three thousand quid, instead of the six thousand it might have been; so I was glad I never signed the paper they asked me to. And so was the Boss!”

The Skipper glanced out to port. “There’s Nord Kyn now. We’ll be in Honningsvaag by 4.0 near enough.”

“Did you hear about the trawler that was arrested by the Russkis for poaching?” Alfie said. “They took ’em all ashore and gave ’em third degree, like, asking ’em if they were communists, whether they belonged to the party in England, that kind of thing. Well, they says to one bloke: ‘What do you think of ’Arry Pollitt?’ And this bloke scratches ’is ’ead, and after a bit ’e says: ‘ ’Arry Pollitt? Ah don’t seem to know ’im. What ship’s ’e in?’ ”

It was an old story but a good one, and we all laughed. “It’d take more than the Russkis to get any information out of a bunch of hairy-arsed fishermen,” said George.

The bridge-door opened, and Jim the Bosun, Johnny Large and Ringelly came in to take over the watch. They came armed with tea and sugar and pots, and a small, brown enamel teapot on a lanyard which was slung on a convenient switch at the back of the bridge, as if they were likely to be there for some days instead of a mere four hours. Ringelly took over the wheel, and George and the others departed to get their breakfast, taking their emergency supplies with them. In a few minutes cigarettes had been rolled and lit, Jim was talking about the repairs to the roof of his

house which he hoped to find done by the landlord when he got home, and the peaceful routine of watch-keeping in fair weather was fully re-established.

We overhauled a timber-ship bound in for the fjords, and the desolate cliffs faded and reappeared as the snow-squalls blew over; and then, out of the massed clouds ahead, in a chink of saffron light, stood the bluff of North Cape, shouldering its storms. From now on, our bows would be pointing south.

THIRTY

The Hills are Whiter and the Wind is like Acid

It is 1 o'clock in the afternoon and thickening into twilight when we at last round Nord Kyn and open up the broad mouth of Porsangerfjord. The mail-boat passes inshore of us with all its lights burning, evoking unasked an image of the luxury—so much more desirable in thought than in reality—the cosseted interlude, of travel by passenger-ship. Then it is gone, its deck-lights lost in the driving dark. Each returning dusk now abbreviates with its opaque snowlight the dwindling days; and with each dusk the arctic night invests more closely these shrouded northern valleys. The lights of houses, clustered for company at the sea's edge, or burning, solitary, on the capes, strike out each dusk more pitifully upon the precipice of darkness like the last stars in a cold sky, the candles in the windows of a ransacked town.

And now, as the six rows of square, lit windows blink out of the white hillside, the précis of a town, across the water, the motion of the ship eases, the engines idle, and mind and bowels relax. We have been fourteen days not far from land in fair weather: the case would be the same if we had been three years seeking the north-west passage with Henry Hudson or the north-east with Challoner. "Peace at last," says Laurie, coming off the

THE HILLS ARE WHITER AND THE WIND IS LIKE ACID

bridge for a jersey and a stiff shot of Haig. Only at sea, perhaps, is to arrive better than to travel, however hopefully.

It is already colder than it was two weeks ago, as we lie motionless in the little crater of a harbour waiting for the pilots. The hills are whiter and the wind is like acid on one's skin. We watch the lights along the shore for the single moving light which will be the pilot-cutter; there it is now, one disembodied red lamp riding like a will-o'-the-wisp through the darkness towards us, to materialize alongside with a burst of throttle. The pilots haul themselves over the rail with their suitcases and come up on to the bridge.

"Gut afternoon, Skipper. Thank you for the last time!"—and we realize that by an odd chance one of these two is the dark, disgruntled one who brought us through from the south. He has been backwards and forwards several times since then, scrambling up rope ladders and over unfamiliar bulwarks in the small, cold hours, rattling out his helm-orders on the bridges of tramps and trawlers, crouched over the radar-scanner, the "enemy", a remote and almost symbolic figure, as impersonal as Charon. To find that his face is familiar is like crossing the Styx twice over.

In a few minutes the engines are turning once more, the lights swing past, and we are heading out of the harbour. For the first time there is a moon, shining through layers of gauzy clouds; after the stars and the flaring northern lights, it is like a return to normal, an end of marvels. Soon we pass a merchantman, plugging south with a deck-cargo of timber. No signal, no blink of greeting flashes between us; like strangers, like stars, we draw near, then draw apart, and the thump of his engines dies away astern.

Barnsley, the galley-boy, comes up on to the bridge to collect the empty pots. He is a small, sturdy lad with bristly black hair and dark brown eyes in a sallow face. One can imagine that he did not get enough to eat as a child; or perhaps it is simply the miner's skin, starved of the sun. Because he comes from an inland town—

eponymous, in his case, though I suppose he must have some other name—because he is nineteen or twenty years of age and married, was down t'pit and has never been to sea before, he is something of a curiosity. At the very outset of the voyage, one could feel the opinion of the others towards him: not hostile, but sceptical; a neutral, slightly scornful attitude, in which judgement, veering towards prejudice, was suspended—but only just. Then, while Raymond, the old sea-dog of a deckie-learner, went green and took his boasts to his bunk, Barnsley, the landsman, remained on his stocky legs, quite unperturbed. He was efficient, besides, and humorous in a compact, unsmiling sort of way, and could give as sharp an answer as he got. Quite soon he was accepted; though keeping to himself the reasons that had driven him from coal-mining to deep-sea trawling.

"What's for tea, Barnsley?" Johnny Large asks him as he gathers up the pots from the racks round the bridge.

"There'll be booger-all for tea today," says Barnsley in his flat, West Riding drawl. "T'enemy's on board."

Johnny laughs. "Ay, it'll be fish. I'd forgotten."

"'E's a good cuke, though, is Shorty," says Jim the Bosun. "When he wants. There's not many cukes as good as 'im."

"There are not. Why, Tich can make a tea out of a bit of straw and a mouse!"

Fearnoughts, sea-boots, frocks and sou'westers have been cast off now. On the bridge, or working on the deck, dismantling the washer and pounds, swabbing down the decks of the last few remains of fish and guts, or down in the forepeak on the gear, the men are back in cruising rig of dungarees and clumpers. The fish-room hatches—there is no other way into it—are battened down, and the thermometer on the bridge falls as the refrigeration is allowed to do its work in peace. Within forty-eight hours it is down to freezing-point; and there it will stay until the day before we dock. Then the fish will be allowed to thaw gently out—or the bobbbers will want to know the reason why.

THE HILLS ARE WHITER AND THE WIND IS LIKE ACID . . .

Aft, the showers are in demand and the electric razors are busy. Laurie, shaved and shining like an apple, comes on to the bridge and looks quite as much a stranger as the pilot. At each reading of the log he works out our ETA afresh, and never neglects to add: "Depending on what the weather's like outside, of course."

Next morning the foghorn wakes me at 5.0. I bundle out of my bunk, dry-mouthed, and go up on to the bridge. The engines are at slow, and we are drifting past Tromsø in the middle of a great billowing cloud. After a time we wander out of it, and the pilot rings up full ahead again. The same cloud overflows the valleys and with its summits glowing in the sun builds up fabulous ranges of mountains beyond the mountains themselves. Gradually it withdraws, leaving festoons floating between the hills or trailing raffishly from the tops. A brisk little breeze comes rippling over the water and sets it sparkling; a snibbie dashes gaily past us on some inconsequential mission; and we pass a man rowing a boat with long, steady strokes along the edge of the water. Ahead and astern the channel winds; and I try to picture, to feel, the quality of life in surroundings so beautiful and solitary and stark, I who have shared briefly a life that is as elemental, and sometimes far more dangerous. Are they aware, these Norwegian crofters living below the mountains on the shores of their continuous, saltwater lake, watching the ships passing—the trawlers hustling north and south, the timber-ships and mail-boats, the scurrying snibbies—seeing the sun go down as they bring in their winter loads of spruce and fir, waiting for it to reappear and the soil to thaw enough for the spring planting, setting their lines in the cold, still days, are they aware of themselves in context? Are they aware of hardship and loneliness? Or of the compensations? The questions seem naïve; yet I remember the people of the Blasket Islands off the Kerry coast—*islands almost as remote as these*—moving to the mainland a year or two ago. The old, unquestioning fortitude had left them at last. Subdued by the Atlantic

CAPE OF STORMS

winds, unsettled by rumours of the city, they had come ashore one afternoon for good; and it seemed as if the restless voices that fill the air with their shallow comparisons had won another victory. All that west coast of Ireland, and the islands that lie like sleeping Leviathans off-shore—islands with a tradition of piracy and splendid names, Aran, Inishbofin, Achill and Clare—are strewn with the roofless ruins of cottages and crofts, mere commemorative cairns now of ancient virtues. Will these Norwegian valleys be unpeopled one day by the same centripetal force?

Who knows? Men no longer accept without compunction the pattern they are born into. And yet, on this bright autumn day, the questions seem academic. The pleasure of wind and sun, water and mountains, snow and shadow, seem to collect into one's mind recharged memories of all the beautiful places one has ever been to, and draw their remote and disparate glories into the aspect of one, total experience. There is no need to compare, to match one memory with another: one's mind is irradiated with sunlight and the inexhaustible glory of the earth.

THIRTY-ONE

The Long Voyage Home

SNOW-SHOWERS came brushing over the water, as opaque as mist, then cleared, and we steamed on beneath tremendous displays of mountain and cloud; and, as the light was going, came up to Lødingen. The boat that took off our pilots brought aboard mail; letters and bundles of newspapers, anticipations of homecoming. The international acrimonies and stale scandals brought one back with a jolt to the quite different realities of the ordinary, shoreside world in which eye and ear are forcibly fed with words, without respite, for eighteen hours a day. Aldous Huxley once included the labels on sauce-bottles in an essay on reading, the secret vice

of the empty mind; and we turn with appetite and the addict's remorse to the past three weeks' daily ration of nonsense.

The weather-report is non-committal, and we set course for Traen Islands and the mouth of Vestfjord under an inky cap of cloud lit at the edges by a dying light on the white and jagged coast-line of the Lofotens. The radar packs up, and for four hours Sparks peers and pokes at its intestines by the light of successive matches until the Skipper asks—in the manner of one seeking information—whether anybody has looked to see if there is snow on the scanner. Nobody has. Somebody does; there is; and the box of tricks springs into life again and guides us out with its Cyclopean eye.

Laurie, with the weight of the trip off his shoulders and with only the weather, tides and markets as subjects for spasmodic anxiety, relaxes in the berth and starts to talk about his early days at sea. His father, an old man now, is one of the best-known of the earlier generation of Hull trawler-skippers, and was in his day one of the most successful; his grandfather was a smack-skipper who was said to have been the only man to *sail* a steam-trawler home from Iceland after an engine-breakdown: so, as Laurie himself remarks with a hint of bitterness, he had very little chance of becoming anything except a fisherman. Certainly, his indoctrination started early. During the first World War his father was based in Malta in the RN Patrol Service, and for two years was able to have his wife and family of eight out there with him. When the time came for them to come home, they had to split up, and Laurie, now eight years old, was sent off with a label round his neck to land at Marseilles and cross France by himself. Safely home, he went to live with his grandmother in a little terrace house in Eton Street, behind the Fish Dock. Eton Street, like its neighbours off Hessle Road, runs blindly down to the high wall that surrounds the dock, and the skyline is filled in with the steep, shingled, cuneiform roofs of the smoke-houses, and the air reeks of fish.

With the war over, his father went back to trawlers, and was soon taking one or more of his sons—Laurie among them—on pleasure-trips to Iceland in the school holidays. They must have been fun for a boy, those summer trips to sea, with the run of the ship, and no premonitions. On one of them they put into Dyrafjord on the west coast; and going up the steps of the little stone quay, Laurie slipped and fell into the water. He was hauled ashore by the bystanders and taken into a house nearby and stripped and dried and dressed by a woman he remembered, even at the age of nine or ten, for both kindliness and comeliness. It was more than thirty years before he went ashore there again, as a skipper in his own right, to find that the small boy who had slipped and fallen in was still remembered, and that the handsome woman who had dried him off was now a handsome old lady in her sixties, still living in the same two-storey wooden house as she had done then. It had been a memorable day, that return to Dyra (Derry, in fisherman's usage) in early September; for it turned out to be the day for the rounding up of all the sheep from summer pasture up in the inland hills and valleys. They were driven in to be bought and sold and re-marked and separated, those bound for the pot being penned, while the rest would be turned out into the mountains again for the winter. This, like the rounding up of the reindeer in the Finnmark valleys, was one of the events of the year, and all the farmers for miles around gathered in the neighbouring valley of Ukadale, their minds bent on conviviality and commerce, and their pockets full of "cocktails" in flasks.

Laurie, weatherbound in the fjord and on the strength of the slight, sentimental link with the people of the village, found himself wedged into a car with the old lady, her brother who was the local trawler-agent, his daughter, her child (she was unmarried and had had this one, so her father said, "just for fun"!) and several more, to be swept with hair-raising nonchalance over the winding mountain-roads to Ukadale.

The herding of the sheep into the stone pens went on all day;

so did the haggling over prices and the marking, and the free circulation of "cocktails". The day ended with a gigantic meal in the kitchen of a convenient farmhouse, with the whisky being produced from its hiding-place on a shelf in the lavatory, and Laurie keeping a weather-eye on the ships sheltering in the fjord below.

Such contacts are as refreshing as they are rare, the fluke of some emergency of engines or weather; days ashore are not included in the normal schedule of a trawler's voyage.

At the age of fourteen, Laurie left school and, after six weeks as a chemist's errand boy, went to sea as a deckie-learner in his father's ship, the *Lord Talbot*. He stayed in her for a year, and then moved on to other ships, gaining all the time, as deck-hand, Third Hand and Bosun, the vital experience in the physical handling of the gear, the background knowledge of his trade, without which no man can become a trawler-skipper. Trawling is one profession in which there have never been any short cuts; and every skipper starts as a deckie-learner and does his time on the deck. By the time he was twenty-one, Laurie had his Mate's ticket.

"I'll always remember my first trip as Mate," he says now, as we sit in the stuffy cabin with the engines thumping away beneath our feet and the radar howling the other side of the bulkhead and an occasional, loud swish from the sea rubbing past the hull. "Four landmarks in my life, and they all happened together when I got home from that trip. I had my twenty-first birthday; I got engaged to be married to Ethel; I wore a dinner-suit for the first time; and when I went to the cashier in the office for my settling he asked me how much I wanted instead of telling me how much I could have! I didn't know myself. 'Can I have twenty pounds?' I said, a bit hesitant; I was sure he'd say no. 'You can have thirty-five, if you like,' he said. It was the biggest sub I'd ever had in my life."

In those days, and indeed right up to the war, settlings were made after four trips, instead of after every trip as they are now. As a result, the crew were allowed to draw subs after the first three

trips against their credit from the preceding trip: it was for the firm's cashier to say how much a man might draw; and it was always kept within the limit of what was already owing to him. He could not draw, in fact, on the hypothetical earnings of the next trip.

Lauric, although he would have become skipper before he was twenty-five in any event, was accelerated into taking his ticket by a run of bad trips in a ship called the *Lord Ancaster*. He was married by this time, and a £3 per week allotment was paid automatically to his wife when he was at sea; and his settling, with that amount deducted, for four trips came, on one occasion, to 3/2d.

"It wasn't a matter of how much would you like that time. He looked down the ledger, worked it out, and said: 'Three and tuppence. Shall I give you a cheque for it?' And I pushed the poor-box across and said: 'Might as well put it in there. Or give us another half-crown and I can take the wife to the cinema.' Anyway, I borrowed a fiver off the Boss; and when I got outside I ran into a pal of mine who asked me how my Skipper was doing—and I told him. 'He's heading for the workhouse,' I said, 'and taking me with him.' And, of course, it reached the Skipper—he was a bloke with only one eye, I remember—and he wasn't too pleased.

"Well, our next settling came to ten quid for the four trips; and I said to myself: 'To hell with this. I can do better on my own.' You always think that, of course; but I had my time in as Mate, so I borrowed eighty quid off my father and went to Nautical School for three weeks, sat for my skipper's ticket, and got it.

"The Boss had given me a bit of encouragement because he knew that, being my father's son, I was familiar with the Icelandic grounds; so when the *Sprayflower* docked next trip, he sent me off in her; and I stayed in her for two and a half years, and we got knocked down on our way to Iceland. I told you about that."

He broke off and, saying: "Better see where we are," went on to the bridge, returning a minute or two later with the log-reading.

"Seventy-eight miles in just over six hours," he said jubilantly. "That's twelve and a half knots. If she keeps this up, we'll make Tuesday's tide comfortably—if we don't get a blow, that is." I thought of all the hundreds of time he must have made similar calculations, in slow ships and fast, in good sea-ships and pigs, in fair weather and in the teeth of sou'westers and rolling the rails under in nor'westers beating unchecked across all the empty Arctic, in the rising whine and the fag-ends of gales with a dying wind and a dangerous cross-swell; his ships and all the others, from the great distant-water grounds, from the Hindenburg Line and the Horns, from North Cape of Iceland, from East Bank and Bear Island and Andenes, from Skolpen and the Parson's Nose, from Kildin and Cape Cherni, from Spitzbergen and the ice-strewn races off Cape Farewell, all plunging southward on the long voyage home.

I looked round at the familiar, comfortable berth. There was nothing to connect it with Laurie or with any other skipper. It was utterly impersonal. The woman with the chrysanthemums, the horseshoe with the horse's head superimposed (left behind, as it happened, by her previous skipper, Bill Dreevers), the un-nautical little oak wall-brackets, were the stock decorations of any waiting room or office or hotel bedroom; and when the skipper went ashore at the end of the trip a small canvas grip would contain everything here that belonged to him. He might be in a ship for a year, two years; he would still be a transient, treating this cabin, his only home for forty-five weeks out of the fifty-two, as a soldier treats his barrack-room or a traveller the inns along his journey. Yet if this is familiar, but impermanent, his house ashore is permanent but unfamiliar; and this enhances a skipper's isolation. He is a man who is most at home away from home. But something contradictory and paradoxical about this uncomfort-

able truth prevents him from making the best of it; he is always yearning for something which is no more than an image in the mind, a reluctant nomad with ancestral memories of the plough.

And this, of course, is true for all trawlermen, for all sailors, too, perhaps, whose quarters are more cramped and makeshift than a skipper's cabin, whose duffel-bags—that most impractical form of luggage—are the very emblem of transience. It turns them, in some inexplicit way, into perfectionists, since they lack the opportunity to make the landsman's compromises; and sets them free, since they are largely disengaged from the landsman's pre-occupations, of many of his shallower prejudices.

Such musings are interrupted by the appearance of Loftly's face round the curtain, announcing the appearance of Maloy light through a break in the showers ahead.

"Thanks, Thoddy," says the Skipper, and follows him back to the bridge to confirm. Baroy, Flatoy, Maloy, Tennholmen, Swino, Stadtland: like Theseus, we rewind the thread of lights that leads us out of the labyrinth.

THIRTY-TWO

A Time for Yarning

SATURDAY again, and the fresh breeze and moderate sea, with showers of snow and rain chasing from horizon to horizon, have moderated into a day calm and overcast and a beam swell that has *Brucella*, never slow to roll at any time, plunging first one rail and then the other, but still taking no more water aboard than comes spouting in over the deck through the scupper-ports. There is an unwearying fascination, for me at any rate, in the behaviour of a ship in a seaway, and the one disappointment of this trip is that it has never been really rough. Big ships, meeting

with heavy seas, smash into them and through them in a trial of strength; but such elephantine methods are foreign to small ships which must rely instead on their buoyancy, their speed of recovery, and the aptitude of their design. Like judo experts they parry their adversary's haymakers and turn his brute force to their own advantage; and the wave that a moment ago hung like a collapsing wall above them goes sliding harmlessly under their keels. It has the same slightly diarrhoeic spell as an act on the trapeze, faultlessly repeated over and over again.

By comparison, this is dull going. We keep up our twelve and a half knots over the mild swells: swells so unimpressive and smooth, like successive folds in the cloth of the sea, that *Brucella's* response to them seems disproportionately violent, a kind of over-acting.

The hours pass; I do a spell at the wheel, or wander down into the forepeak—which is chilly and smells of stale fish—where Jim and Alfie are at work on the trawls, dismantling the old one or rigging a new one, are busy, at any rate, with knives and braiding-needles among many fathoms of rope and twine and net. There are plenty of jobs to be done; there always are in ships: the purchase on the fore-derrick to be renewed, the ratlines on the shrouds to be checked and re-lashed, the decks to be washed down; they are tackled one by one, but there is no hurry now. We have three full days on passage to bring the ship up to a sufficiently spruce and yacht-like condition to satisfy the Skipper.

The hours and sea-miles pass. On Sunday morning at 7 o'clock the cliffs of Norway loomed briefly above the eastern horizon, and at half-past three, when we set the log abeam of Swino light, we had a last glimpse of the land under a rising moon, the snow-caps glistening Chinese white above the cliffs.

All day the weather fined, and as, later that same evening, we stood, Jim the Bosun, Ringelly, Les and I, on the bridge yarning, it was in circumstances of placid contentment, with the ship beneath our feet seeming to skim over the easy swells like a

shallow, and a moon, high now and near the full, dispensing over ship and sea its cold, clear, secondhand light.

It is at such times that the wretched war is discovered to have left one useful legacy: it gives us all a common starting-point. Here all our lives touched, though they may have touched nowhere else before or since; for a war, like a love-affair, is a single, isolated experience, however prolonged, while peace, like marriage, is a climate. Moreover, from his experiences within the common experience, everyone has something to contribute. Jim has his memories of flying barrage balloons from a "Pud" drifter in the Firth of Forth, and Ringelly his of the disintegrating paddle-steamer, the *Devonia*, and her six sisters; Lofty has an inexhaustible saga of misdeeds, from roaring down the autobahns of Western Germany in a looted Mercedes-Benz to the trials and ruses of his nine months on the run; and Les has the recollection of a terrifying period of MTB's in Tobruk, and following it, a similar escapade to Lofty's. When he came home to England after two years in the Middle East, the Navy tried to cut short his overseas leave and ship him off in a destroyer to the Far East. Les felt sufficiently aggrieved at this to stay away; for which he did ninety days' detention; and when, at the end of it, he was told that he would have to start again as an ordinary seaman and get VG conduct reports for two years before he could even earn his discharge, he departed once more, to be finally dismissed the service, with ignominy, and without a gratuity. This has left him with no great affection for the Andrew; but he is an excellent character, all the same, very sturdily-built, with a heavy jaw and blue eyes that light up his rather sullen face when he smiles. Like most fishermen, he probably made a first-class sailor for just so long as he was fairly treated; like most fishermen, he found a naval uniform pinched here and there. Individualists to a man, they tolerate the arctic discipline of wind and sea, but could not submit to the synthetic discipline of service life.

From their various tales, and Laurie's, one got a vivid glimpse

of a department of the war which rarely found its way into the papers, and which, so far as I know, still lacks for a historian. Since trawlers made ideal minesweepers, it was inevitable that the great majority of fishermen—Lofty always excepted—should have joined the RNR Patrol Service, as in the first war, and stayed in trawlers. Their new job was, in fact, not so very different from their old—the streaming and hauling of heavy gear—only for a different and more dangerous catch; and fishermen, temperamentally, they remained. Accustomed to working in small, highly trained teams for eighteen hours a day to a specific end, and to going ashore once the end was accomplished and the ship docked, they regarded the Navy as overstaffed, and over-fond of such irrelevancies as ceremony and polish. (When I first joined *Brucella* from *Romola* I was asked her complement; and when I replied “About a hundred,” the information was received with astonishment. “What do they do all the time?” I was asked. To which the only answer was: “If you were in the Navy, you should know.” And after watching a trawler’s crew of twenty or so for a time, I began to wonder myself.) The Navy, for its part, recognized that here it had first-class seamen who did their allotted job with skill and exemplary courage; and its attempts to turn them into bluejackets tended to be uneasy and a bit half-hearted.

Like their counterpart ashore, in the mine and bomb disposal units, the minesweeping flotillas worked by trial and error, never knowing what lethal novelty might be lying in ambush beneath their keels, and frequently lacking gear to deal with it when they did know. Like most departments of modern (and for all I know to the contrary, ancient) war, it was boring and hazardous by turns, and quite often boring and hazardous at the same time, and had the nasty habit of killing a man when he was least expecting it.

Laurie’s own career was typical of that of many other trawler-skipppers who joined up during the first six months of the war. It so happened that when the balloon went up he was ashore, land-

lord of a pub called the White Swan in a village in the West Riding. Here he had found himself the inheritor of a traditional role in a traditional society in which the local farmers addressed him as "Maister" and everybody knew what rates he paid; in which the saddler and the corn factor still exercised their power and the streets were full of ponies and traps on market-day. Some facets of the job appealed to him, for he is a man who likes to be liked, and a popular landlord draws to himself much easy friendship; but the publican's life appears deceptively attractive only to those who overlook the hard work, the long hours and the late nights—not to mention the depressing spectacle of men the worse for liquor. And Ethel hated it.

In any case, qualified skippers were in demand; and so they gave up the White Swan, and Laurie joined the RNR Patrol Service with the rank of Skipper Warrant. After a period of indoctrination at Lowestoft, he was sent to the Forth as second skipper to a *Pud* in an old trawler bound for Narvik as part of the balloon barrage defences; but the ship had so many defects she had to be docked; and by the time the defects had been attended to Narvik had fallen. It was that sort of time, a period of abortive campaigns, when one was always meeting men bound for ski-regiments in Finland who never got further than Aberdeen.

They were still kicking their heels in and around Rosyth when Dunkirk fell, and Laurie and a dozen other junior skippers were recalled to Lowestoft; but in the event he did not go to Dunkirk either. ("Thank Christ!" says he with a chuckle.) Instead he was sent up to Yarmouth, to a trawler/minesweeper called the *Cotsmuir*, where, apart from sweeping in the North Sea, it was part of his duties to pilot into the harbour ships with skippers less skilled, or less experienced, than himself.

The river at Yarmouth is as much a part of the town as the main street, and from the *Cotsmuir's* berth you could practically throw a dart into the board in the bar of the nearest pub; but it was unfortunate that the entire ship's company should be ashore

the night the Admiral in charge of minesweepers should decide to pay the ship a visit and meet her skipper. The idea of an utterly deserted ship is enough to make any admiral's blood boil or run cold; and the interview the following morning was less friendly than the proposed interview of the preceding evening was intended to be. However, threats of court-martials were not proceeded with; and towards the end of 1940, Laurie found himself in command of an ex-Norwegian chaser (the type of ship that catches the whales and brings them back to the factory-ship) at Dalmuir on the Clyde.

Svana, and her three sisters, *Soika*, *Sotra* and *Sarna*, had been in the Antarctic about their legitimate concerns when the war broke out, and had returned to Europe to find their home-port German-occupied and had therefore put into Britain. Here they were promptly commandeered and converted into Double L minesweepers to deal with the new menace of the magnetic mine. They were 121 ft. overall, pretty ships and fast, and equipped with generators powerful enough to run the sweeps without dependence on the shore. In November the four of them left together for the Middle East via Freetown and the Cape.

Their original destination was Tobruk; but when they arrived at Suez, in the February of '41, it was to find their services more urgently required in the Canal, where the Italians had just started to drop the first magnetic mines. As the only Double L sweepers in the area, they were kept there. Based on Port Said, it was their job to sweep the Canal after a raid, and to sweep ahead of all the big ships passing through.

This was not too bad until Jerry took a hand and began dropping acoustic mines as well. As he craftily used to drop one of each, in pairs, it was some time before the sweepers discovered what they were, and longer before they discovered a method of dealing with them. The notion of firing bursts of a dozen rounds from a Hotchkiss into the water failed to explode the mines, even if the guns themselves had not quickly become red-hot and

jammed; and the early versions of the windy hammer inside a watertight box, banging away on a frequency which would set the things off—effective later on—proved erratic both mechanically and acoustically, at first.

It was not long before the first of the four, *Sarna*, was lost. There had been a raid during the night, and the scouts along the Canal-banks reported that mines had been dropped in a certain position. *Sarna* and *Svana* were sent out to sweep. By this time they were wise to acoustics, and to the fact that Jerry was in the habit of dropping a magnetic and an acoustic together, and as they approached the position in order to pulse for magnetics, they switched off main engines and all auxiliaries, for an acoustic mine is fired by the vibrations set up by the engines of a ship passing overhead, and it was no part of anyone's plan to detonate one accidentally. After a time *Svana's* sweep sent up a magnetic: the two ships continued to ghost up and down over the area. Nothing happened; and at last *Sarna's* skipper got chocker and started his engines. He had not gone very far when there was a roar and a spout of white water, and *Sarna's* stern reared out of the water and she went down fast by the bows. No lives were lost; but one of the engineers, who was sunbathing in the bight of the big electric cables aft, woke up to find himself in the desert.

Gradually, as the windy hammers become more reliable, the acoustic mine became less of a menace; but before that happened, *Svana* was sent to do her first spell of duty in Tobruk.

This was in June '41. It had been surrounded and by-passed in mid-April by Rommel, newly in command of the Afrika Korps; thereafter for six months it remained like an abscess deep in the enemy's flesh and was subjected to continuous, violent and un-availing treatment. Utterly beleaguered, its garrison supplied secretly by night by destroyers which slipped up the wreck-choked channel after dark and left before dawn, it was kept under continuous bombardment from air and land, its quays and buildings were pulverized, and its harbour and approaches regularly

sown with mines. As it could only be supplied by sea, it was essential that these mines should be swept as often as they were laid. This was *Svana's* task.

"Christ, I was frightened in Tobruk!" Laurie said. "If you weren't being dive-bombed by Stukas or high-level bombed by 88's, you were being pounded by Bardia Bill. Bardia Bill was a bloody great howitzer Jerry set up somewhere out in the desert to bombard the town with; even used to stop us sweeping in daylight. We reckoned they used to use the masts of the old *Liguria*—she was an Italian boat that had been sunk in the harbour and was sitting on the bottom—for ranging; and one day I was sent off in a whaler with a bunch of the lads to blow her masts up. So away we went, a bloke called Giles and myself; we scrambled aboard, and we were just setting the charges of gelignite when there was a Stuka raid. By God, I've never dropped anything so quick in my life! They didn't hit us, but they came bloody close, because when it was all over and we started back to our own ship, the sea all round the *Liguria* was full of spuds and onions where the bombs had opened up the old spud-locker. Of course the blokes took the opportunity to do a quick bit of looting—the cabins were still fitted out as they had been in peace-time—and they carted back to the *Svana* so many fans and bedside lights I had to put a stop to it. The ship's generating plant couldn't cope with it all!"

On another occasion, Laurie was ashore in Navy House, which was still standing and still had some gin left, when N.O.I.C., Commander Smith, RNR—who later became a Captain, and was killed attacking a German tank in the streets of Tobruk with a stripped Lewis—came up and asked him if he would pilot the destroyers *Voyager* and *Waterhen* out of the harbour as there was a duststorm blowing, and what with that and the fact of no moon they did not think they could make it; and it was imperative that they should be fifty miles from Tobruk by daylight.

"I'll have a go," said Laurie, and dodged off down to the quay where under screened lights the frantic unloading of supplies

for the garrison was in full swing. It was pitch dark and the air was thick with flying dust and sand; the moment the last case of bully, the last drum of oil, the last box of ammunition was ashore, *Voyager* cast off and headed out through the gritty fog, with *Waterhen* close astern.

Laurie was on *Voyager's* bridge with her Captain and Navigating Officer. The harbour was choked with wrecks, and visibility was to be reckoned in yards. Cautiously, uncomfortably aware of his responsibility on the unfamiliar bridge, and relying on the trained instinct of the born seaman which is almost like an extra sense, Laurie groped his way out towards the boom. The first part was the worst, for there was no fixed course to steer. From week to week, from day to day, as ships were sunk in the fairway, the geography of the harbour changed; there were no marks, no lights, no glimmer of a reflection on the water, as they edged their way out through the shrouding dark. Tension mounted. Then out of the murk, and as it seemed right under their bow, emerged the boom defence vessel which marked the gap in the boom. A sharp helm order, a tilt as the ship's head swung, and they were through and out into the swept channel, and the engine-room telegraph rang and the deck beneath their feet shuddered as the speed mounted. By the time they were out in the open sea and turning eastwards towards Alexandria they were moving through the water at 38 knots, and when dawn broke Tobruk was far astern.

Tobruk under its billowing cloud of smoke and dust, shimmering through the heat of noonday, ringed with fire at night: the next time he saw it was from the cab of a truck a few nights later, sneaking in through a gap in the encircling German lines.

They did a fortnight's sweeping there and then returned to Alex to refuel and re-provision, and then back again once more. This went on all the hot and dusty summer, a routine that was a linked series of emergencies through which, despite, laughter could always break in and take a man unawares. Did they not

discover that the cellar they had been using for so long as an air-raid shelter was in reality an ammunition dump? And were there not, here as everywhere, the opportunists, and none more brazen than the Warrant Bosun, Skipper of Tug 302, who, when the Hospital Ship *Karapara* received a small bomb down her funnel while evacuating Australian casualties in the harbour, took advantage of the absence of all the ship's officers at the resulting fire to rifle their cabins for booze? And was there not the spaniel Zulu which mysteriously changed its sex and spent every air-raid weeping under Lauric's pillow?

The end came by bomb, all right, but in Alex, not Tobruk, and not in action or the heat of battle, but with the ship tied up alongside boiler-cleaning, and her whole company ashore. And the bomb that sank her did not even hit her, but burst on the wharf alongside, thrusting the masonry outwards and turning the *Svana* over on to her beam ends with half the quay on top of her. There Lauric and his Number One, Jack Davis, hurrying back to the dock down Sister Street and its disreputable alleys at the height of the raid, discovered her, took one look, and went consolately back to the Beau Rivage bar.

Ships were short, and Lauric was transferred to Port Said and an office desk with a tally on it that read: Assistant Port Minesweeping Officer. It was from their office in the docks that he and his C.O.—an Irishman whose occupation of "private eye" in peacetime had by no means blunted his eye for a woman subsequently—deployed a force of minesweepers that grew by degrees from an original, dilapidated four to a score or more, and whose job it was to keep the Canal open at all costs. It was a job with which, from his early days in the Middle East with *Svana*, Lauric was familiar; though the transition from the bridge of a ship to a desk ashore was not one he relished.

Although at the end of '41 and for the greater part of '42 there was practically no traffic through the Mediterranean and the convoys of troops and material went plodding round the Cape, the

Canal remained the last, irreplaceable stage in the routing of supplies for Auchinleck's armies in the Western Desert. The Canal could not serve its proper purpose; but the purpose it served was vital. The enemy appreciated this and made frequent attempts to close it. He relied chiefly on mines, knowing that one sunken ship was enough to hold up traffic north- or southbound; and he peppered the narrower stretches with enough of them, magnetic, acoustic, and later bi-polar—against which our de-gaussing gear was ineffective—to keep the sweepers busy.

The first problem, always, was to learn where they had fallen, and Arabs were stationed at intervals along the banks of the Canal with instructions to report the position of anything dropped by an aircraft into its brackish waters. Then the Canal would be closed to shipping until the sweepers had done their work.

This, unless, as occasionally happened, a skipper went sick and he took the ship to sea himself, was no longer Laurie's preoccupation. Promoted from Temporary Skipper to Skipper Lieutenant, he was kept busy maintaining the little fleet of ships in a seaworthy condition on the trickle of spares that came through from UK, and on all the thousand and one duties and anxieties which the man at the front affects to minimize and scorn until called upon to do them himself.

In the desert, Auchinleck's offensive of November '41 had relieved Tobruk and passed Benghazi before it was halted. There was a pause in which both sides prepared for the next move; and in May '42, a few weeks before the new British offensive was due to begin, Rommel attacked. The British line of defence, carefully prepared by Ritchie with strongpoints and deep minefields, collapsed; Tobruk fell; and within a month Rommel was at El Alamein and poised for the final thrust that would carry him through to the Nile.

In Alex, Port Said, Cairo, the air was electric. Rumours and denials of rumours, plans for evacuation and defence, buzzed in everyone's ears, while the ambiguous Egyptian made covert

arrangements to greet the Afrika Korps. Everywhere, not only in the Western Desert, it was the black middle year of the war, when it seemed that the catastrophes of the years before were but the preliminary to stalemate or utter defeat. It was the year when only the war-cabinets dared look ahead, knowing what was planned for next year and the year after, while the man in the thick of it kept going on limited and fretful expectations: a week's leave in Cairo, a bottle of beer, mail from home. No one knew how it would all end, or if indeed it ever would end: it had been war for as long as one could remember: it looked as if it would be war for as long as one could foresee.

These events composed the background of life in Port Said but did not directly alter the task of the minesweepers. If anything that task became of even greater importance as more and more material was carried through the Canal to sustain the armies that were facing Rommel and provide them with the power, at last, to drive him out of Egypt and back, across the Libyan plateau, across Cyrenaica to his final rout beyond the ruins of Carthage.

The Canal must be kept clear of mines; and, as far as the Navy was concerned, these ruffianly fishermen with their stiffening of *ci-devant* bank-clerks, hairdressers, insurance salesmen and book-makers must be kept up to the mark with occasional inspections.

"Of course," said Laurie, "the straight-stripers thought nothing of us Skipper Lieutenants, and when NOIC came down to Port Said to inspect the Flotilla it was always the Skipper ships that got it in the neck."

It was not that they did not try to please; rather that they lacked that final meticulousness, that devotion to detail for its own sake, by which the Navy proper keeps life's deplorable lapses into comedy at bay. It was through this nonchalance, one might say, that in one ship, in all other respects immaculate, a small, squalid heap of old fag-ends, beer-bottle tops and other current rubbish should be discovered on the veranda just as NOIC crossed the bow for his inspection; but it was pure bad luck that the rating

hastily despatched to clear up the mess should choose the moment when that eminent officer, whiter than any detergent advertisement in his beautifully-laundered No. 10's, was passing beneath him to finish the job with a bucket of sea-water. It was shocking, it was by no means in the best traditions of the service; it was damned close to mutiny; but when it was perfectly well-known that the skipper of that particular ship, a deep-draught trawler-minesweeper, *Raglan Castle*, had only a few weeks before strolled close inshore to the Libyan coast and, in dangerously shoal water, had carried out an exemplary clearance of moored mines—a job of work for which he had been recommended, and was later awarded, a DSC—there was not very much to be said.

"After all these years," sighed the ex-private eye, when he came to hear of it, "and you skippers still haven't learnt!"

The hot and dusty, fly-blown Egyptian summer passed. Rommel was held at El Ghazala and trounced, a few weeks later, at El Alamein. The winds of war had changed. In the secret and subterranean planning-rooms in Whitehall and Washington, Operation Overlord was brewing. Already, in the spring of '43, it had started to work upon innumerable lives, an invisible force that plucked a man from his job there, a regiment from its battle-station here, a ship from its flotilla elsewhere, and drew them into their place in its exacting pattern, until at last a vast horde of men and weapons was in surreptitious training for this one complicit deed. At the head of them all would go the minesweepers; and when Laurie returned to England in the early part of '43, he was soon sent to take command of a motor m/s in a flotilla, based on the Mersey, which was already working up for this culminating role.

Not that foreknowledge, if they were burdened with any, weighed particularly heavily on them. Once a fisherman, always a fisherman; and while the other ships in the flotilla towed their sweeps in interminable exercises off the mouth of the river, Laurie, with his CO's connivance, towed a miniature trawl—made on

board to his own specifications—and kept the flotilla, and part of the local populace, supplied with fish.

Then, at last, they were on their way across the Channel in the darkness of the morning of the 6th of June to sweep ahead of the invasion fleets. From all the ports of Southern England, from the Thames to the Avon, the ships were mustering; and as the mine-sweepers crept in towards the coast, the men aboard them were very much aware of these two things: the invisible and hostile coast ahead, the silent host of ships astern.

"I was on the wing," Laurie said, "and I had to go on in until I picked up the outline of Marcouf Island. That marked the western end of our sweep. Bloody dicey it was, too; so I said to my No. 1—Peter Geckie, I used to call him, a sad little Scot: I asked him once if there were any women in the town where he came from, and he said: 'Ay, there's two. One's daft, and the other never comes out;' that was Peter—I said to Peter while we were on our way across: 'Go down the wardroom and fetch up a bottle of rum and set us up two good drams,' I said, 'and when we pick up this Marcouf Island, we'll knock 'em back. We shall need them,' I told him. So Peter gets the bottle of rum and sets up a couple of tots: and there are the two of us on the bridge, peering ahead through the darkness for this Marcouf Island and half-expecting at any moment every gun from Cherbourg to Le Havre to start shooting at us; for we'd been told it was heavily defended.

"Well, we got closer and closer inshore and nothing happened. Then, suddenly, I spotted the shape of this island dead ahead; and I turned to Peter: 'There it is. Give us that dram!'—and he gave it me and I said: 'Here's to success!' and knocked it back. He hadn't touched his, though, and I asked him why.

" 'I think I should be sick if I did,' he said.

" 'Well I shan't!' I said, and tossed his down as well. 'And now,' I said, 'let's get on with this flaming invasion!' "

As the small ships swept up and down in the summer darkness close inshore, men waited for the sudden eruption into flame of

that dim coast which they were sure must, at any moment, come. And still all was quiet; and at last the senior ship sent his signal: 'It is now safe for the Navy to proceed.' And to their ears across the water, under the first faint glimmer of dawn, came the pulse of the engines of the landing-craft, moving in endless procession towards the beaches.

Then, suddenly, the darkness sprang to life. The guns ashore opened up; from far out to sea the covering battleships replied; and first one ship and then another struck an inshore mine and gouted into flame and smoke; and overhead, with a continuous roar of engines, the aircraft streamed out on the first sorties of the day.

From that moment on, for ten days, as the armies poured ashore and struggled to establish themselves in indestructible force, the invasion belied its calm beginnings; and the mine-sweepers, moving at four knots in predictable formation close inshore, provided an easy mark for guns and bombs. What Laurie saw and felt there differed not at all from what others saw and felt, there off the beaches of Normandy, off Sicily and Africa and the Italian mainland, and on the oceans and shores of all the warring world. In victory as in defeat, ships are sunk and men die horribly. The shells rustle overhead or waterspout into the sea and the air is hot with singing metal; the aircraft dive out of the sun and the guns chatter and ear-drums flinch. In the heat of it, with the gales importunately breaking up the man-made harbours and the vessels pounding on the beaches and the first big battles beginning to rage ashore, he did the job he had to do, and was not sorry at last to find himself back in Portland.

They needed that few days' respite after the unceasing strain on men and machines off the invasion beaches; but for Laurie it turned out to be a longer respite than he expected. The night before he was due to sail he was rung up and offered an urgent job with Naval Salvage. He accepted, hardly knowing what was entailed, and was ordered to leave his ship without even the formality of handing over to a successor, and to hold himself in

NUMBER FROM KILLINGHOLME

instant readiness to report wherever he might be directed. Six weeks later he was still on leave and, driven as much by an extremity of boredom as by the convenience of doubling his pay, was helping out a friend by driving a ten-ton Bedford round the East Riding. He was almost becoming resigned to the life of a civilian in uniform when his presence was demanded at once, if not slightly sooner, at Naval Salvage HQ at Dover.

Over the next eighteen months this involved everything from hauling a trawler off the Goodwins to raising a sunken petrol-lighter off Greenhithe; from kedging an examination-drifter off the beach at Deal to refloating a torpedoed Liberty ship. It was the sort of practical seamanship that appealed to him and at which he was supremely good: and when, with the war over at last, his time was up, he found himself reluctant to go. But the Admiralty could offer no promise of permanence in a department which the safer seas of peacetime would see much reduced; and as ineluctably as Fate and almost without his own volition, Laurie found himself back on the Fish-Dock at Hull. With several million other people, he was back where he had started.

THIRTY-THREE

Number from Killingholme

THE air in the berth was stale and grey with tobacco smoke and it was very late. The electric fire emitted its twinkling, suburban glow, and the glasses in their rack by the bunk chattered and clinked, and the barometer was rising. One could go on yarning like this forever, with the sea-miles dropping astern and the level of the Haig dropping in the bottle, and the end of the trip almost within hailing distance; but the Skipper was still short of sleep. With a gruff good night, he hauled a rug over himself, rolled over and was soon snoring.

On the bridge Ted had just brought up a fresh brew of tea from the galley in the ancient brown enamel pot.

"Drop of fresh, 'Ughie?"

It was hot and virulently sweet, and one knew that if ever one tasted tea like this again, no matter where, it would re-create exactly this moment: the darkened bridge and the friendly figures of the watch, George and Ted, and Alfie at the wheel; the lit bowl of the compass in the deckhead, and the sea white under the moon.

"Any news, Ted?"

Now that we were back within radio range of England every splutter of morse had him fidgeting with expectation.

"No. Blast it!! Ah'll be glad when this flaming trip's over."

"Ah'm glad when any flaming trip's over," said Alfie.

"Are you kidding?" said George.

"It's a grand night; another twenty-four hours and we'll be in the river if it keeps like this." The spokes of the wheel move slowly through Alfie's hands as he talks: a full turn to port, pause, a full turn back to midships, pause, a full turn to starboard, pause. The telemotor takes out all the shock of the sea on the rudder: one might be opening and closing a valve for all the life in it.

"Ah wish it were always like this," says Ted gloomily. George gives a grunting little laugh. "Next trip it won't be. November the gales start."

"Christmas trip's the bastard I 'ate," says Alfie. "Flaming cold and dark and miserable. Ah could do with 'aving every Christmas trip off."

"Ah could do with having every trip off," says Ted.

"What's this I hear," George asks, changing the subject, "about Barnsley and the deckie-learner?"

Alfie laughed. "They were sky-larking, and the deckie-learner cut Barnsley's head open with a fiddle-baton, and Barnsley's threatened to do him. That's all."

George grunts non-committally and returns to his scrutiny of

NUMBER FROM KILLINGHOLME

the empty, moonlit sea; and I remember Laurie's description of the old-time Mates: "If the Mate didn't crack a joke, nobody cracked a joke; and if the Mate didn't say a word, no bastard said a word." Times have changed; and skippers and mates who hit a man first and argued afterwards, if at all, are figures of the past.

But it is time to break this state of trance into which the gentle movement of the ship and the night and the quiet stars have lulled one, and roll frowstily into one's bunk, to try and remember—one's mind under a kind of tension of contentment—the lines from the "Ancient Mariner":

"The moving Moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside——"

and the gloss, which is almost better: "In his loneliness and fixedness he yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward. . . ." And on the fringes of sleep, Flecker's:

"A ship, an isle, a sickle moon,
With few but with how splendid stars. . . ."

Oh, one yearns towards the journeying moon in excellent company, all right.

And the following morning burst brilliantly upon us, with the sun rising out of the sea with a flourish of flaming cloud that seemed to writhe upwards on the rising draught of the sun's heat; and all day we sped along over a calm sea at a steady twelve and a half knots until, at half-past four in the afternoon, on a course by which we should close the land at Whitby or thereabouts, the day which had begun like an exploding bomb went out like a dying bonfire, a heap of ashes and a spark or two fanned up by the breeze of evening.

It was excellent occasion for the final chores of the trip. The bridge was scrubbed out with disinfectant until it smelt like a well-kept urinal; the decks were scrubbed, and the accommodation; even the carpet in the Skipper's cabin was given much the same treatment by Tich with a bucket of soap-suds and a cloth. The brass work was buffed up until it shone like the steel in the Chief's immaculate engine-room. The showers were in demand, and shore-going clothes began to appear, miraculously uncreased, from drawers and duffel-bags. A signal arrived instructing us to get our number from Killingholme Signal Station as soon as we got into the river, and dock on the morning tide (03.00) on Tuesday—a cheerful hour to arrive anywhere; and down in his berth, the Skipper, in shirt-sleeves and minus collar and tie like a man getting ready for a party, settled down to make up the crew's bond bills for the trip. These would go to the office when we docked and would be deducted from their settling. And as we hurried on into the misty darkness, passing trawlers outward bound now, among innumerable gulls, and still with no land visible to eye or radar, the remaining hours of the trip became a stretch of time to be done with as soon as possible; they thrust themselves between us and homecoming; they were a tiresome intervention.

We were in the heart of the North Sea fishing-grounds now, and the chart was a maze of incredibly shoal soundings—16, 21, 27 fathoms—and weird names: Great and Little Fisher Bank, Outer Rough, Tail End, Great Silver Pit, Markham's Hole, Dogger North, Bayman's Hole. East of us are Upper and Lower Scruff, and down off Yarmouth, Teakettle Hole, Ribs and Trucks Pits and Winterton Twenties—commemorating who knows what long-dead fishermen and memorable hauls. East coast fishermen, Laurie says, still date past events by such remarks as: "That was when the soles were in the Pits."

At 8 o'clock in the evening we picked up the Yorkshire coast north of Flamborough Head on the radar. There was mist on the

sea and the lights were veiled, but it was all plain sailing now. By 1.0 in the morning we were rounding the low spit of land which is Spurn Point and marks the northern shore of the Humber; and at 3.0 we were at anchor off Killingholme, waiting for our number before proceeding up river. And now, as we waited, the winch-horn sounded for the last time, the diesel started; and down on the deck, the crew were busy running the warps off the winch-barrels and flaking them out along the deck—the warps that had given us so many headaches, and would be giving the Boss a few more.

A light blinked at us across the water, and Sparks, tucked into the wing of the bridge with the Aldis lamp, acknowledged it. We were number Ten.

"Ten," said the Skipper. "Hell, if we're tenth ship they won't land us till tomorrow." It was as if we had been taking part in *some obscure kind of a race—a race in which an unknown number of starters, all beginning from different places at different times, had been converging on St Andrew's Dock—and had reached the finishing post to find that we were last; and we felt almost cheated.* This was a market-tide; but if our voyage were landed for today's market—with nine other voyages on the deck as well—there would probably be a glut and much of it would go unsold. Better to leave the fish on ice for another twenty-four hours.

"It means we'll be well-placed for tomorrow's market, at any rate," said the Skipper.

The mist was lying low over the water, masking the lights of the channel-buoys, as we weighed anchor and headed upstream. It was a quarter to four, very cold and still, with the moon among the whorled grain of the clouds like a knot in wood. At half-speed we felt our way from light to light, each one faintly blinking through the mist at us just as we despaired of seeing it, round the last wide bend of the river past the commercial docks, an iron forest of cranes and gantries and the masts of ships, past the burnt-out warehouses and the brick clock-tower with its ruined

face and the paved, sloping foreshore below the railway lines, and came, losing the last of our way, to the lock. The lock-gates were closed and the red light was burning on the mast above the Insurance building; but we did not anchor. Instead, the Skipper kept station with the shore on helm and engines while the tide, which had not long turned, slid darkly and silently past. Then the red light went out and the green came on; the gates of the lock opened; and we drove up beyond the entrance and turned our bows towards the shore, and the tide caught us and spun us round and carried us with hardly a helm or an engine order alongside the quay at the mouth of the lock. A few people were loafing under the lamps in front of the company offices, and as soon as we touched the two customs men scrambled over the rail by the gallows and hurried, heads down, clutching their little suitcases, up to the bridge. Then, while one settled himself in the Skipper's cabin with his forms and papers, and the other went aft to clear the crew, we began to move gently, stern first, through the lock-pit.

In the cabin aft the customs man was asking everyone in turn: "How many cigarettes? How much tobacco?" Everyone was allowed to take fifty cigarettes or two ounces of duty-free tobacco ashore: everyone had fifty cigarettes or two ounces of tobacco. It all seemed like a pretty good waste of time; but later if you were unlucky, they might send the rummagers on board to go through the berths and every crack and locker, looking for the odd flat fifties of ship's Woodbines tucked away to be collected later. Or the police might stop you at the gate. They take a peck of trouble, do the Customs and Excise Department, to make sure that fishermen, coming home for forty-eight hours after three weeks at sea, do not have an extra ounce or two of dutiable tobacco to fill their pipes ashore with.

It's odd, and rather infuriating, too, how customs men have a way of making one behave as if one is lying, even when one has nothing to hide and is telling nothing but the simple truth. I

would readily believe that Lofty, for instance—in a grey, pin-stripe suit and with a grin of impudent complicity on his face—was smuggling anything from gold-dust to hashish if I could first imagine how he could have procured either during the past three weeks: and Alfie, looking farouche in a brown felt hat, pulled down over his eyes—surely his fifty cigarettes contain marijuana? Even Jack Caine, dourer, if possible, and even more monosyllabic, now his stocky figure has been crammed into a shore-going suit, might have a pound or two of shag lashed round his waist under his belt. And Raymond, the deckie-learner, must have an extra hundred Woods somewhere, out of sheer bravado. How else could he hold up his head in the Towing-Block Inn this evening?—unless the word passes for the deed. On the other hand, one would never suspect Jim the Bosun, or Ringelly, or Johnny Large or Big Jim—or even Tich, who has still not had the news he's been waiting for all these weeks—nor do the Customs men. They make a fair haul, all the same, to be claimed and paid for in the morning, and resist with deplorable integrity the invitation to accept fifty for themselves as the price of a blind eye.

They retire to the bridge to count the contraband and fill in their forms, and we stand along the rail in the crisp early morning air as the ship sidles through the lock-pit and into the narrow pool. The great sheds are deserted; but there are lights burning in half-a-dozen ships bound out on this tide, and the old, stale stench is still there—the smell of five hundred years of fish.

We work our way up the dock past the moored ships and the bomb-damaged quay and edge alongside into a space barely longer than the ship herself. The gap between us and the shore diminishes; a rope is thrown and caught, clumsily, and made fast. The open sea is behind us; the trip is over. We shake hands warmly.

"Coming with us again next trip, 'Ughie?"

The ship's side grinds gently against the wall. One by one they spring over the rail and ashore, to search for taxis or wait for the

early buses or walk home through the empty streets. It is quarter to five and still wants two hours for dawn.

THIRTY-FOUR

Another Voyage is over

"GOOD trip, Laurie?"

"Ay; not too bad, thanks."

"What you got?"

"Two thousand kit, near enough. Five hundred of haddocks."

"Oh ay. Well, you won't be landed till tomorrow now. *Southella's* landing twenty-three 'undred kit; there's a lot of fish about."

"There would be."

On the bridge, Charlie Holness meets the ship as he meets every ship. "I'll be down at the office later on," says Laurie. "There are one or two things. You know. You've got the requisition?"

Charlie nods. "See you later, then."

Sparks locks up the wireless room, puts the key on its hook in the chartroom, says good night and vanishes, still looking harassed. George, satisfied with the mooring of the ship, puts his head round the bridge-door.

"Okay, Skipper?"

George, too, looks different, with his black hair brushed flat and his long body urbanized by a suit, but his light blue eyes are still as uncompromisingly humorous and hard.

"Cheerio, George. See you tomorrow morning."

Both of them will be on the dock to see the voyage landed and to pass on to the chief bobber the requisite backhander, by way of "protection", to make sure that it is set out to the best advantage. George goes out and the bridge-door slams behind him.

ANOTHER VOYAGE IS OVER

Laurie, who has forgotten his key, decides not to disturb the family but to stay on board until daylight. There is still a last drop of Haig in the bottle: we might as well polish that off before dossing down on the seat-lockers for the last two hours of the night.

We go down into the cabin; it is warm and bright and bare, like a hotel room when the last trunk has been carried off to the lift. We settle down, dog-tired; and suddenly, without warning, the lights dim and the twinkling fire goes out and the hum in the air which one has long since ceased to notice dies away, leaving the whole ship dark and still. After a moment Laurie says: "Ah, that's the Chief gone."

The dock lights gleam through the scuttles, and the only sound is the gurgle of the black dock water against the plates, and quite quickly one begins to notice the cold.

"I don't like a ship to be quiet like this," Laurie says. "It doesn't seem right."

Although we are still on board, the ship has ceased to own us. She is trammelled by the land; and another voyage is over.

~~THE~~ END.

Glossary

- Andrew. The Navy.
- Bag. The cod-end, or its contents.
- Baitings. If one thinks of a trawl as a huge stocking, the Baitings correspond to the part from knee to ankle and the Belly the reverse of the same. (See diagram, p. 68).
- Basket. As a quantity of fish, three-fifths of a kit, i.e. 6 stone.
- Becket. A short sling or strop of rope or wire.
- Belly. With the Baitings comprises the main part of the trawl between the Square (the mouth) and the cod-ends.
- Belly-lines. These are of wire and form the "frame" of the trawl. There is no direct strain on any part of the net.
- Bobbers. The Bobbers are the longshoremen who land the fish at the Fish Dock at Hull; Lumpers at Grimsby.
- Bobbins. The big steel or wooden rollers which are attached to the foot-rope of the trawl and trundle along the sea-bed during towing.
- Bob-off. To take a nap or forty winks.
- Bollards. Usually no more than a thick post of iron or concrete to which ropes—usually mooring-ropes—are made fast, in trawlers specifically the sheaves through which the warps are led from the winch to the gallows.
- Butterfly. A bracket-shaped fitting at the mouth of the trawl to which head-line, foot-rope and quarter-ropes are attached. It also has its own bobbin, called the Dan Leno.
- Cable. A length of steel wire (from 15 to 50 fathoms) connecting the doors, at one end, to the butterfly at the other.
- Clumpers. Cut-down sea-boots worn by fishermen off duty or on deck in fair weather.
- Cod-ends. The closed end (or toe) of the trawl where the fish collect. Made of nylon or manilla, the cod-end is made up of two cod-ends braided together, and closed at the end by the cod-end knot.

GLOSSARY

- So when a Skipper says: "I think we'll need a new pair of nylons next trip" this is what he is talking about.
- Dan (buoy). A buoy made usually of a single pole with cork-floats and fitted, usually, with a radar reflector, a string of Pellets and a grapnel: used to mark a ground during fishing.
- Dan Leno. The large, circular bobbin linked to the butterfly. This is a comparatively recent addition to the "furniture" and saves wear on the cables and butterfly. Its association with the comedian is obscure: one suggestion is that Dan Leno is a corruption of the Breton fisherman's word guindineau, with associations of hoisting or straining.
- Deckie-learner. An apprentice deckhand.
- Dodging. The technique of riding out very heavy seas by meeting them head-on at reduced revs. It is akin to heaving-to; but for some reason fishermen never heave-to.
- Doors. The 8 ft. by 4 ft., steel-shod, massive boards which ride upright on their runners and by being canted outwards the length of the cable ahead of the trawl keep the trawl mouth open and also, by stirring up the sea-bottom, tend to chivvy the fish into the trawl.
- Double-bag. When there is more fish in the trawl than can be safely hoist aboard all at once, the catch is divided to make two or more bags. Less precisely, a double-bag is simply a worth-while haul.
- Duffs. A marine growth the size of a football and the colour of putty, prevalent on certain White Sea grounds at certain times of the year.
- Fearnoughts. Heavy flannel trousers worn by fishermen; they start life white in colour.
- Fish-room. The hold of a trawler—refrigerated these days—in which the catch is stowed.
- Flats. Flat fish, i.e., plaice, lemon soles, dabs.
- Frocks. The enveloping oilskin capes worn by trawler-men when working on deck.
- Gaffer. The Boss, i.e., the owner or managing director of the trawler's parent company.
- Gallows. The massive steel horseshoes, fitted fore and aft, port and starboard, which carry the warps from the winch and bollards to the ship's side.
- Gilson. A wire tackle rigged from the for'ard derrick by the mast and used as a jack-of-all-trades: for hoisting the bobbins in and out-

GLOSSARY

- board, for heaving in the trawl itself when hauling, and for hoisting the cod-end aboard.
- Green Stuff. Round stuff, swag, or other, less printable names—that is, COD—the fish that supplies the great bulk of every trawler's voyage and provides trawlermen with their bread and butter.
- Grimmy. Ship, Skipper or man from Grimsby.
- Hauling. In trawling specifically, the operation of recovering the trawl from the sea-bed.
- Headline. The wire that runs the width of the trawl-mouth—from butterfly to butterfly—and which is fitted with aluminium floats. These keep the headline up, and therefore the mouth of the trawl open.
- Hides. Cow-hides which, with a number of spare bits of net known as false bellies, are attached to the lower part of the cod-end to prevent chafing.
- Islands. The Vestmannaeyjar or Vestmann Islands off the southern coast of Iceland.
- Kit. An aluminium bin, designed to hold 10 stone, in which the fish is unloaded on the fish dock; alternatively, the unit (10 stone) by which all trawlers' catches are computed.
- Laying. Lying-to, without engines, for any reason. You lay to haul, or to mend gear, or when the weather is too bad for fishing but not bad enough for dodging.
- Liners. Not passenger-ships in this context but boats used by line (as opposed to net) fishermen inshore off the Icelandic and Norwegian coasts.
- Liver money. The oil from the fish-livers—cod, haddock, halibut—is extracted on board and sold separately from the catch to the liver-oil factory, which is on the fish dock and is owned and operated by the trawler owners. The money—which may amount to as much as £10 for a trip per man—is divided among the crew and added to his settling.
- Messenger. The wire, with the Messenger Hook on the end of it, which is used to draw the two warps together and into the towing-block.
- Old Snowy. Snaefells Jokull—a mountain on the west coast of Iceland: one possible example of many of how fishermen adapt local names to their own usage. So Dyrafjord becomes Derry, Sviatoi Noss becomes Sweatynos, and so forth.

GLOSSARY

- Pellets.** The small, air-filled floats attached to a dan-buoy like the tail of a kite. They stream with, and therefore show the state of, the tide.
- Pounds.** The compartments into which the deck is divided, and into which the fish are released from the cod-end. Their purpose is to prevent the fish from slithering all over the deck. The compartments into which the fish-room is divided are also called pounds.
- Pud.** Ship, skipper or man from Lowestoft.
- Quarter-ropes.** The ropes which lead from the centre of the butterfly—to which they are clipped—to the bobbins, and which are used for heaving the bobbins alongside when hauling.
- Rail.** The bulwarks of a trawler.
- R.T.** Radio Telephone.
- Round Stuff.** See Green Stuff.
- Seine.** A type of fishing-net, it is lowered in a wide circle from boats and then drawn together.
- Sheave.** A pulley or block through which a wire or rope may be rove.
- Shooting.** The actual process of launching the trawl over the side.
- Skint.** Broke.
- Square.** With the wings, forms the mouth of the trawl.
- Swag.** See Round Stuff.
- Towing-block.** The big snatch-block aft through which the two warps are led. It serves to keep the warps clear of the propeller and gives the ship freedom of manœuvre when towing.
- Trawl.** (Diagram, p. 68.)
- Voyage.** The fruits of a trawler's voyage; known also as the Trip.
- Warp.** The heavy steel wires on which the trawl is lowered to the seabed.
- Washer.** The salt-water bath in which the fish are washed after gutting.
- Whaleback.** The raised and cambered fo'c'sle head of a trawler.
- Wings.** See Square.
- Yorky.** Ship, Skipper or man from Hull.

